Table of Contents

1. Allegiances
2. Prologue
3. Chapter One
4. Chapter Two
5. Chapter Three
6. Chapter Four
7. Chapter Five
8. Chapter Six
9. Chapter Seven
10. Chapter Eight
11. Chapter Nine
12. Chapter Ten
13. Chapter Eleven
14. Chapter Twelve
15. Chapter Thirteen
16. Chapter Fourteen
17. Chapter Fifteen
18. Chapter Sixteen
19. Chapter Seventeen
20. Chapter Eighteen
21. Chapter Nineteen
22. Chapter Twenty
23. Chapter Twenty One
24. Chapter Twenty Two
25. Chapter Twenty Three
26. Chapter Twenty Four

Allegiances

THUNDERCLAN

Leader: Firestar-handsome ginger tom
Apprentice, Bramblepaw

Deputy: Graystripe-long-haired gray tom

Medicine cat: Waterlily-pretty calico long-haired she-cat with amber eyes

Warriors: Longtail-pale tabby tom, dark black stripes

Mousefur-small dusky-brown she-cat

Brackenfur-golden-brown tabby tom
Apprentice, Tawnypaw

Dustpelt-dark brown tabby tom

Sandstorm-pale ginger she-cat

Frostfur-beautiful white she-cat, blue eyes

Cloudtail-long-haired white tom

Cinderpelt-dark gray she-cat

Brightheart-white she-cat, ginger splotches

Thornclaw-golden-brown tabby tom

Ashfur-pale gray with darker flecks, tom, dark blue eyes

Ferncloud-pale gray with darker flecks, she-cat, pale green eyes

Apprentices: Bramblepaw-dark brown tabby tom, amber eyes

Tawnypaw-tortoiseshell she-cat, green eyes

Elders: One-eye-pale gray she-cat, the oldest she-cat in ThunderClan, virtually blind and deaf

Dappletail-once-pretty tortoiseshell she-cat, lovely dappled coat

Speckletail-pale tabby, and the oldest nursery queen

SHADOWCLAN

Leader: Tigerstar-big dark brown tabby tom with unusually long front claws.

Deputy: Russetfur-dark ginger she-cat, formerly a rogue cat
Apprentice, Cedarpaw

Medicine cat: Littlecloud-very small tabby tom

Warriors: Oakfur-small brown tom

Boulder-skinny gray tom, formerly a rogue cat

Jaggedtooth-huge tabby tom, formerly a rogue cat
Apprentice, Rowanpaw

Queens: Tallpoppy-long-legged light brown tabby she-cat

WINDCLAN

Leader: Tallstar-black-and-white tom, very long tail

Deputy: Onewhisker-brown tabby tom

Medicine cat: Barkface-short-tailed brown tom

Warriors: Mudclaw-mottled dark brown tom

Webfoot-dark gray tabby tom

Tornear-tabby tom

Onewhisker-brown tabby tom

Runningbrook-light gray tabby she-cat

Queens: Ashfoot-gray she-cat

Morningflower-tortoiseshell she-cat

Whitetail-small white she-cat

RIVERCLAN

Leader: Leopardstar-unusually spotted golden tabby she-cat

Deputy: Stonefur-gray tom, battle-scarred ears
Apprentice, Stormpaw

Medicine cat: Mudfur-long-haired light brown tom

Warriors: Blackclaw-smoky black tom

Heavystep-thickset tabby tom
Apprentice, Dawnpaw

Shadepelt-very dark gray she-cat

Willowbreeze-solid gray she-cat with bright blue eyes

Mistyfoot-dark gray she-cat with blue eyes

Apprentice, Featherpaw

Loudbelly-dark brown tom

Queens: Mosspelt-tortoiseshell she-cat

Loners: Scourge-black tom with one white paw

Shadowheart-solid black medium-haired tom with green eyes

Bone-massive, muscular, black-and-white tom with green eyes, long legs, and a battle-scarred pelt.

Prologue

The night sky stretched above Waterlily, adorned with the shimmering beauty of Silverpelt. As she caught her breath at the top of the ravine, her heart fluttered with uncertainty. The weight of destiny hung in the air, and she couldn't help but sit in awe from the significance of it.

Her gaze fixated on the starry expanse, each glimmering point of light holding the stories of those who had passed into StarClan. Among them was a presence that tugged at her thoughts, the one named Shadowpaw, a young cat whose fate was now intricately woven into the fabric of ThunderClan.

Waterlily's paws itched to pace to and fro, her mind restless with questions. Why had StarClan led Shadowpaw to their Clan? What role would he play in their future? The rustling leaves and distant calls of the night were the only sounds that accompanied her thoughts.

Her heart swelled with apprehension. The path ahead was uncertain, and yet the stars above seemed to hold a promise, a destiny waiting to be fulfilled. As a medicine cat, Waterlily was attuned to the subtle whispers of the spirits, and she had faith that their guidance would become clear in due time.

She closed her eyes and lifted her muzzle, allowing the night breeze to rustle her fur. Her paws carried her forward, as if guided by a force beyond her control. She reached a familiar clearing, a sacred place where the moon's reflection danced upon the surface of a still pool.

A soft glow enveloped her, and Waterlily felt a presence, ancient and wise. It was Spottedleaf, a spirit she had known since her kithood, who had walked among the stars for many moons.

"Waterlily," Spottedleaf's voice echoed in her mind, gentle and soothing. "I know you still seek to know about Shadowpaw. I can only tell a few things that we may have found out."

Waterlily blinked her eyes in dismay. They may have finally uncovered something about the young apprentice. She pricked her ears and listened intently as Spottedleaf continued.

"Shadow and light intertwine in ways beyond our understanding," Spottedleaf's ethereal form seemed to shimmer. "He carries a legacy, one that echoes through his bloodline."

Waterlily's heart quickened. "A legacy? What do you mean?" She was clearly confused as what Spottedleaf was trying to tell her.

"In his veins flows the lineage of a cat who walks a darker path," Spottedleaf revealed. "But remember, Waterlily, every cat is born with choices that shape their destiny."

Waterlily pondered Spottedleaf's words. Shadowpaw's ancestry tied him to a cat who has embraced darkness. Then she thought of Tigerstar. He was related to Tigerstar! Though he was loyal to ThunderClan and knew nothing of his past, he could still find out. And worse Waterlily didn't know if Tigerstar knew himself.

"His presence here is a chance for redemption," Spottedleaf continued. "A chance to prove that bloodlines do not dictate a cat's heart."

The connection between Shadowpaw and his mysterious past became clearer. Waterlily felt the weight of this knowledge, the significance of his journey in ThunderClan. A young cat was given the opportunity to rise above his heritage, to redefine himself through his actions and choices. Much like Bramblepaw did. They both had to make the right choice and follow the light instead of the dark.

"Thank you, Spottedleaf," Waterlily whispered, gratitude filling her heart.

"Remember, Waterlily, the path ahead is woven with both shadows

and light," Spottedleaf's voice faded, leaving Waterlily alone with her thoughts.

As Waterlily made her way back to camp, the stars above seemed to burn a little brighter. Shadowpaw's destiny was still unfolding, but she knew that he carried within him the power to shape it. He alone could only do that. Not even Waterlily could make him change his dark ways. If he truly was related to Tigerstar in some way, she too, was worried for him.

She padded over to Fireheart who was lying in the sun. "I have something I think you should know."

Fireheart lifted his muzzle from his paws and blinked blankly at her. "What is it?" He asked, tiredly.

"I think Shadowpaw is related to Tigerstar."

Fireheart widened his eyes. "Ar-are you sure?" He stuttered, clearly confused.

Waterlily nodded slowly. "Yes. And it scares me just as much as Bramblepaw scares you."

Chapter One

Under the dim light of the moon, Waterlily stood at the entrance of the medicine den, her gaze meeting Fireheart's with a solemn understanding. Her paws were weighted with the gravity of the task ahead as she dipped her head in affirmation. The traveling herbs she had carefully prepared were ready for the journey to the Moonstone. Beside her, Fireheart's green eyes held a mix of determination and reverence. He was about to embark on a journey that would forever alter his destiny – the journey to receive his nine lives and the mantle of leadership for ThunderClan.

Waterlily felt a sudden chill run down her spine. She has never done this before and wondered if she would be able to join him, or if he had to this alone. She suspected alone, though she longed to see how it was done. When she first joined in, Bluestar already had her nine lives and never spoke of how it was done. Nor did Spottedleaf or Yellowfang ever speak of it either. She wondered if it hurt or if it was super simple and lasted just a few seconds.

Waterlily led the way, her form moving with a grace born of familiarity with the terrain. She navigated through the gorse tunnel, her senses attuned to every rustle and whisper of the night. Fireheart followed closely behind, his green eyes alert. They walked in near silence, the only sounds being the soft padding of their paws and the occasional call of a distant owl. She padded to the thunderpath and stopped just a tail-length from the foul-smelling path and walked along it, instead of crossing like usual. She wanted to avoid going to ShadowClan if they could. Going through WindClan would be much safer, but she decided it was better to go on the sidelines instead.

"We'll cross here." She meowed softly, pointing with her muzzle.

Fireheart glanced in that direction and swallowed hard. He did not like crossing thunderpaths. Waterlily rested her tail on his shoulder and looked gently at him. "It'll be easy. Monsters are usually sleeping at this time." She reassured him.

Fireheart nodded and raced after her as they both crossed the thunderpath in the same rhythm. Waterlily's pawsteps were soft as they reached the Moonstone's clearing, the luminous surface casting a silvery glow on the ground. Fireheart's gaze was fixed on the stone, his expression in awe. Waterlily took her place beside him, a silent support in this pivotal moment.

As Fireheart approached the Moonstone, Waterlily beckoned him to touch his nose to its cool surface. As he did, a hush voice seemed to fall over the clearing. Waterlily watched, her heart filled with pride. She let Fireheart fall deep into sleep and waited for him to wake. She watched as he jolted as if he was feeling pain multiple times. And then there was a sudden shiver. It made Waterlily want to shake him to wake up as if he was having a bad nightmare, then he laid still.

She pricked her ears in concern. *Was he alright?* She wanted to poke him, but let him lay for a few more heartbeats before she intruded. Then he jolted again. Waterlily sighed with relief, but she still felt concern for him.

He seemed relaxed again, then he opened his eyes. His eyes blazed like fire at first, then he shook his head to clear it. Waterlily tilted her head to the side. She waited till they both reached the dawn light that hit their pelts, making them glow like the sun. "Well?" She mewed, trying not to sound too desperate on knowing if he is now leader of ThunderClan.

Fireheart nodded. "Yes, I am now Firestar." He purred.

Waterlily could sense he was holding back something, but she dared not to enter in his thoughts now. She was proud of him now, and that's all that mattered. "Great!" She purred. "Let's get going back to camp then, shall we?"

She trekked to the thunderpath again and held out her tail to stop Firestar from going, but she quickly put it back down remembering that he is her leader, not apprentice. Firestar noticed her sudden change in helping him, and nudged her softly with his flank. "Don't worry." He purred. "Don't think just because I'm leader, that you can't suddenly look out for me."

Waterlily purred in response, and pressed her body against his just before they crossed the thunderpath. Firestar bolted across first and flicked his tail. Waterlily pushed her paws forward and raced across the thunderpath as she heard a monster roaring close by. She panted hard once she made it to the other side. "Luckily no more thunderpaths." Joked Firestar.

Waterlily playfully rolled her eyes and trekked along the WindClan border. She stopped as she heard paws coming toward them. A WindClan patrol was padding up to them.

"What brings you here?" Meowed a mottled dark brown tom.

"We're just passing through." Replied Waterlily quickly. Her eyes slightly narrowed.

"Mudclaw. Let them pass." A black tom hissed. "I assume you went to the Moonstone?" He added, looking at Waterlily.

Waterlily nodded her head. "Yes." She didn't know if she should mention Fireheart is now Firestar or if she should let him talk himself, but Firestar stayed silent.

"Very well. Carry on." He flicked his tail and awkwardly padded away.

Waterlily dipped her head and remembered that the warrior with the twisted paw was Deadfoot, the deputy of WindClan. "Thank you, Deadfoot." She mewed, then kept on walking on the edge of their territory. Firestar followed in silence. Waterlily felt concerned for her friend. He was reserved and seemed off since they left the Moonstone. "Is everything alright?" She finally prodded.

Firestar deeply sighed. "I don't know what's coming, but it's something bad." His voice trembled as he remembered his dream in the Moonstone.

Waterlily kept silent and let him continue. Her curiosity was peaked. Firestar then continued. "I believe that I received a prophecy." He began. He paused, trying to remember the words that StarClan had told him. He closed his eyes for a few short moments,

then reopened them just as he finally remembered. "Four will become two. Lion and tiger will meet in battle, and blood will rule the forest."

"What does that mean?" Asked Waterlily, even though she knew that StarClan didn't give any easy answers to their prophecies.

"I don't know. I saw bones. And then blood oozing out of them." He shuddered and stopped in his tracks. "All I know is that whatever this prophecy means, there will be blood and lots of it."

Chapter Two

Shadowpaw followed Sandstorm's lead, his senses alert as they ventured along the river's edge. The dawn light hung high in the sky, casting a warm glow over the territory as they patrolled. The river's gentle murmurs provided a soothing backdrop to their journey, a reminder of the ebb and flow of life in ThunderClan.

As they rounded a bend in the river, the sight of another patrol on the opposite bank caught Shadowpaw's attention. His heart quickened as his gaze fell upon a pretty she-cat among the RiverClan cats. Her fur shimmered in the dawn light, and her eyes held a glint of spark and curiosity.

"Willowpaw, don't get too close," a RiverClan warrior cautioned, her tone harsh.

Shadowpaw's ears pricked forward, the name registering in his mind. *Willowpaw*. It was a name that seemed to dance on the breeze, conjuring an image of grace and beauty. He watched as the gray she-cat took a step back, her gaze lingering on the ThunderClan cats for a moment longer before she followed her clanmates. He quickly shook his head as if to clear it then continued to follow Sandstorm, in hopes that she didn't notice the slight eye contact he and Willowpaw had.

The encounter with her lingered in the back of his mind, a fleeting moment that had left an impression on his thoughts. Even though it was short, he felt like it lasted forever. Her blue eyes sparkled from the sun's rays and he was instantly captivated.

"Let's go on through here and then you can get some rest today." Ordered Sandstorm with a flick of her tail. Shadowpaw nodded and followed her, looking back occasionally to see if Willowpaw was still there, but she was far out of sight.

His mind was so distracted from the she-cat's eyes that he was glad to be going back to camp to get some rest. Sandstorm padded down

the ravine and into camp. "Get something to eat." She meowed, then padded over to Firestar's den to share tongues on what had happened during the patrol.

Shadowpaw padded to the fresh-kill pile and suddenly didn't feel hungry. His stomach rumbled, so he knew that he must eat something. He chose a mouse and took it over to the apprentices' den. He ate it in silence just before the entrance. Many of the cats were busy around the camp and it made his mind wander on how long it would till he became a warrior and had an apprentice of his own. He swiped his tongue over his lips then padded inside the den to his messy nest. He curled inside it, wrapping his fluffy tail over his front paws and nose and he let his mind wonder on what life would be like as a warrior. Then he began thinking of pretty blue eyes and a gray she-cat standing in the dawn light.

He closed his eyes and he began to slowly dream.

Shadowpaw wandered through a realm bathed in silver moonlight. The forest around him was a place of ethereal beauty, where the leaves on the trees seemed to shimmer with starlight. As he padded onward, the ground beneath his paws felt weightless, and the air carried a gentle melody that soothed his senses.

And there, in the midst of this dreamlike landscape, he saw her: *Willowpaw*. She appeared before him like an apparition, her form glowing softly in the moon's embrace. Her blue eyes held a depth that seemed to reflect the entire universe.

"Shadowpaw," her voice whispered on the breeze, a symphony of emotions hidden within those few syllables.

"Willowpaw," he replied, his words carrying a sense of wonderment and recognition. Their spirits drew closer, and they touched noses with a tenderness that transcended reality.

They embarked on a journey together. They wandered through meadows adorned with flowers that emitted a soft, soothing light. As the moon climbed higher in the sky, they found themselves by a sparkling stream, its waters like liquid silver. They sat side by side, gazing at the stars reflected in the gentle ripples. Willowpaw's

presence was a calming balm to Shadowpaw's soul.

"It's as if we were destined to be together," Willowpaw mewed, her voice a distant echo of truth.

"I, too, feel this pull towards you," Shadowpaw confessed, his heart echoing with the resonance of a love that defied time and space. They allowed themselves to imagine a future entwined with shared adventures, a future where their love could flourish like the most delicate of blossoms. The dream enveloped them in a cocoon of tranquility and hope, a sanctuary away from the worries of the waking world.

Then Shadowpaw awoke. He looked around the den and saw that he was alone. In his dream, he could almost feel her fur brushing up against his. It felt all too real and he questioned if he had actually gone out to find her and came back to sleep. But he shook his head to clear it. *It was definitely a dream.* Willowpaw probably didn't like him in the same way. He thought about how she reacted when they first looked at one another. She was also captivated, but only for a few seconds before Shadowpaw was pulled away. He wondered if Sandstorm wasn't there to distract him, if he'd be able to see her longer.

He shook his head again. *Clearly not.* She also had a mentor. Then as he remembered her beautiful fur in the moon light from his dream, he suddenly recognized the mentor. *Willowpaw's mentor is Shadepelt! What if she is on her side?* If Shadowpaw even comes near her and tells one wrong thing, he could be in huge trouble by Firestar. And if he gets in trouble, his warrior naming ceremony might be delayed.

Chapter Three

As the days slipped by, Waterlily found herself increasingly preoccupied with Firestar's unshared dream. Her concern grew like a persistent shadow, always lurking at the edges of her thoughts. The changing leaves and the crisp bite in the air signaled the approach of leaf-bare, a time when the Clan's survival would be tested to its limits.

She continued with her duties as the medicine cat, tending to the injured and ensuring the Clan was as prepared as possible for the challenges that lay ahead. But beneath her outward composure, a gnawing worry persisted. Firestar's dream remained a mystery, and the weight of that unknown sat heavily on her heart. Not because she didn't know, but because it bothered Firestar to the point of shaking uncontrollably.

As the first flakes of snow began to fall, Waterlily's apprehension deepened. Leaf-bare's cold grip tightened, and the Clan's resources grew scarcer. She knew the Clan would need lots of catmint and that's the only thing she was missing. She decided to go in the morning. The first snowfall won't hurt the plants now. She laid down to sleep a few tail-lengths from the den entrance, though it was cold, but she ruffled up her fur to keep warm.

Waterlily woke up as soon as the dawn appeared into her den. She padded up to Firestar's den and announced herself. She heard a faint mew and she padded inside. Firestar yawned sleepily and looked up at her, his eyes barely open. "What's up, Waterlily?" He mewed, yawning again.

"I just wanted to let you know that I'll be out be searching for catmint since leaf-bare is here already."

Firestar dipped his head in acceptance and laid his head back down to go to sleep. Waterlily left his den silence and trekked up the ravine and out the gorse tunnel. She decided to start near Sunningrocks where the best supply of catmint usually is.

Waterlily's pawsteps were muffled by the soft blanket of snow that covered ThunderClan's territory. The landscape had transformed overnight, its familiar features now adorned in pristine white. The air was cold and crisp, and every breath hung in the air like a visible whisper.

As she reached the area where the catmint usually grew, Waterlily paused and surveyed the scene. The once vibrant leaves were hidden beneath a layer of snow, their scent masked by the cold air. She lowered her head, her warm breath forming a cloud in front of her as she sniffed at the snow-covered ground. After a few moments of careful searching, Waterlily's keen senses led her to a faint scent that seemed to rise through the layers of snow. She gently pawed at the snow, revealing a cluster of leaves.

With delicate care, Waterlily used her paws to carefully brush away the snow, revealing the catmint leaves in all their green glory. She plucked them one by one, taking extra care not to damage the fragile plants that had braved the first snowfall. Luckily there was plenty and she took all that she could carry. If she had to, she would come back for more.

With her mission accomplished, Waterlily turned to head back to camp. The snowflakes continued to fall gently around her, adding to the already thick layer that blanketed the forest floor. The journey back was slower, each pawstep deliberate as she navigated the snowy terrain. She trekked through, hoping not to make one wrong move.

She finally made it to the medicine den and placed the catmint in the center of the den and began picking off each stem from the leaves. As she worked, the flickering light of the den's entrance cast dancing shadows on the walls. The snow outside reflected the same light, creating a tranquil ambiance. The sun peeked out from hiding behind some clouds and sun high would be coming soon.

Waterlily's focus was unwavering, her mind attuned to the rhythmic motion of her paws. As the pile of separated leaves grew, so did her tiredness. Darkness came fast even though it was just a little bit sun high. Clouds covered the sky and Waterlily could hear soft pitter patters coming from outside her den. She looked up and saw water

droplets coming down from the sky. *Rain*. It would luckily make the snow melt away.

The rain made the air foggy and dim, which made it hard to see herbs in front of her. She stopped and pushed the rest of the catmint to the side. A cool draft carried the scent of rain-washed forest into the den and it made her feel sleepy. She tucked her paws underneath her belly and watched the rain pouring down. It trickled down the bramble twigs that stood above the entrance and soothed her mind. She closed her eyes and began to dream rather quickly.

Waterlily found herself wandering through a moonlit forest, the ground soft beneath her paws and the air filled with a mysterious serenity. The trees overhead whispered ancient secrets, their leaves rustling with a soothing melody. At first it seemed it like a normal dream as she sniffed the air. But suddenly a familiar scent tickled her nose. She looked around the thick forest and then her gaze stopped at a fluffy silver tabby tom. "Featherwhisker." She purred. "It's been a while."

Featherwhisker dipped his head. "It has been a long time."

Waterlily purred loudly. She felt like it has been a long few moons since she's had a good dream from StarClan. Her visions are not as frequent as they used to be. "So what brings you here?" She finally mewed.

Featherwhisker padded a little closer to her and sat down, wrapping his tail over his front paws. "You have no need to worry about Firestar. He will be a fine leader." He reassured her.

Waterlily looked down at the ground beneath her paws. "I know, I just don't know what he saw and I worry that he might be like Bluestar." She confessed.

Featherwhisker shook his head slowly. "No. He is just trying to get used to being leader. You'll see in good time."

Waterlily nodded her head in acceptance and rubbed her cheek against his before he padded off into the distance and disappeared

into the horizon.

Waterlily slowly blinked open her eyes and purred softly. *Featherwhisker was right. Firestar will not be like Bluestar and hide in his den. He just needs some time.*

Chapter Four

The night air was cool against Shadowpaw's fur as he slipped out of the den, his paws making only the faintest of sounds on the camp's well-worn earth. The moon was high in the sky, casting a silvery glow over the camp and the surrounding forest. Every rustle of leaves and every whisper of the wind seemed amplified in the stillness of the night. He sneaked out of camp and up the ravine, then through the gorse tunnel. He was finally out of camp and trekked towards Sunningrocks.

As he neared the riverbank, his heart quickened in hopeful rhythm. The river whispered secrets in the night breeze. He peered across the water, his eyes scanning the shadows that danced upon the opposite bank. And then, there she was – a gray silhouette; her form blending seamlessly with the moonlit waters.

"Willowpaw," he called out softly, his voice carrying across the water.

Her head turned, and their eyes met across the moon-kissed expanse. Her blue gaze held a spark of recognition, a silent acknowledgment of the connection they had forged in their previous encounter. With a graceful leap, she landed on the other side of the river in ThunderClan territory.

"Shadowpaw." She purred. "I was thinking that maybe you wouldn't come."

He felt a rush of emotion, a mixture of excitement and nerves, as he padded closer to her. "I couldn't forget our last meeting. I wanted to see if... well, if we could talk again."

A soft purr sounded from her throat as she looked across at him. "I've been hoping for the same." She confessed.

Shadowpaw and Willowpaw sat silently, looking up at silverpelt. Willowpaw's blue eyes sparkled in the moonlight and Shadowpaw

closed his eyes, loving every moment he had by her side. Before they knew it, it was almost dawn and Shadowpaw had to say his goodbye. He touched her cheek with his muzzle and closed his eyes tightly once more. "I will miss you." He mewed softly.

"I'll see you soon." She whispered, then quickly jumped into the river and swam back to RiverClan territory.

Shadowpaw watched her for a few short moments before returning back to camp. His heart fluttered with anxiety. He felt satisfied that he was able to see her again, yet scared. If anyone else knew he went out to see a RiverClan cat again, he would be in deep trouble. He hurried back into camp and hoped that no one noticed him sneaking back into the apprentice den. He laid down in his usual spot and closed his eyes and purred softly as he thought about the wonderful time he had with Willowpaw.

"Shadowpaw!" A paw prodded him in the side. "Wake up."

Shadowpaw opened his eyes and looked up tiredly at the voice calling out his name. It was Sandstorm. "Huh?"

"Wake up you lazy bum." Sandstorm hissed again. "You've been asleep forever. It's time for some training." She added, flicking her tail then padding out of the apprentice den.

Shadowpaw tiredly scrambled to his paws and followed Sandstorm out of the den. Whatever plan she had for him, he hoped to do well. He got some sleep, but he still felt exhausted. Sandstorm must have figured he was tired, but she didn't care. He needed the training and exercise. Shadowpaw followed Sandstorm out of camp and near Snakerocks. "Okay," She began. "Today is going to be your first test."

Shadowpaw widened his eyes. "A test?" He tilted his head to the side. "A test for what?"

"For becoming a warrior, obviously." She replied snarkily.

Shadowpaw softened his eyes, but he was still in shock. "Great! What should I do?"

"Hunt."

"That's it?" He tilted his head to the side again, more confused than he was.

Sandstorm nodded her head. "Now go." She ordered, flicking her tail once more. "I'll be standing by and watching."

Shadowpaw closed his eyes to gather himself then padded a few tail-lengths north. He could smell nothing, but his ears picked up on some rustling noises a fox-length ahead of him. He immediately crouched down into the hunter's crouch and crept slowly towards the creature. He could then smell mouse. He crept up even slower, now able to see it. His nose twitched and he stopped, waiting for the mouse to be distracted again. The mouse twitched his ear, then went back to washing its face. Shadowpaw then jumped, but the mouse was too fast, escaping his paws. "Mouse dung!" He spat, stomping his paw on the ground in frustration.

He closed his eyes to regain his strength and energy, then opened them again, narrowing his eyes. *I'll get the next one*. He promised himself. *I have to*! He growled softly then padded around until he caught scent of a squirrel. He looked up and finally saw a rather plump squirrel sitting up on a branch. The squirrel's bushy tail twitched with each movement, betraying its wariness. Shadowpaw's muscles tensed, his breathing steady and controlled. This was his chance to prove his hunting skills, to show that he was ready to take the next step toward becoming a warrior. Though he hated heights, he decided to take on the challenge and prove to Sandstorm that he was a worthy warrior.

With a deep breath, he forced himself to step forward, each pawfall a conscious effort to move beyond his apprehensions. The ground felt steady beneath his paws, a reassuring contrast to the swaying branches above. He halted before the tree, gazing upward at the squirrel perched on the thin branch. The squirrel's bright eyes seemed to mock him, its confident posture a stark contrast to his own uncertainty.

Swallowing his doubts, Shadowpaw began to ascend the tree, his claws digging into the bark with determination. The first few pawsteps were tentative, his muscles tense and ready to react at the slightest sign of trouble. His heart raced in his chest. He kept hold

of himself and crept closer to the squirrel, inching his way to the thin branch. He peered down and realized how far up he was. He gasped, then closed his eyes, reassuring himself that he would be fine.

Remembering what Sandstorm had done before, he opened his eyes again and narrowed his eyes. The squirrel, still unaware of his presence, ate a small nut. It twirled the nut in its tiny paws. Shadowpaw sneaked closer then finally gathered up his strength, and leaped. He caught the squirrel in his jaws. The branch broke beneath his paws. He kept hold of his catch and caught a branch above. Luckily he caught it and swung for a good few moments before being able to heave himself back up. He fell quite a ways, but now he was closer to the ground. He softly sighed with relief that he was able to save himself from falling to his death. He leaped down from branch to branch carefully, and finally made it to the soft ground.

The ground was mushy under him and made his paws dirty with mud. He buried his squirrel near the tree, then padded to another spot, hoping to catch something on ground level. At first, he could smell nothing. Then he opened his mouth to taste the air. A wren was nearby. He searched the skies, but saw nothing. For a few heartbeats he thought that maybe his mind was just playing tricks on him, but he then saw the wren land a few fox-lengths away. He narrowed his eyes and went into the hunting crouch. He crept slowly up it then pounced just in time before the wren took off. He caught it in his jaws and bit down, killing it swiftly. He closed his eyes and purred. "Thank you StarClan for this catch."

Chapter Five

With a squirrel and wren now safely stashed in his jaws, Shadowpaw felt a surge of satisfaction. The thrill of the hunt coursed through his veins, and he was determined to prove his skills once more before Sandstorm called an end to the training session. His paws carried him soundlessly over the forest floor as he scanned the area for any signs of movement.

Amidst the rustling leaves and the whispering of the wind, a flicker of brown caught his attention. A rabbit, its ears twitching as it nibbled on some fresh greens. Shadowpaw's muscles tensed, and his paws moved with practiced stealth as he closed the distance between them. He crouched low, his body a coiled spring, every sense focused on his target.

With a swift burst of energy, he lunged forward, his body propelled by powerful hind legs. His claws extended, aimed at the rabbit's flank. The prey's ears shot up in alarm, and it bolted, springing away with surprising speed. But Shadowpaw was ready, his agile body responding to the sudden change in direction. The chase was on, a dance of predator and prey that echoed through the forest. Shadowpaw's paws ate up the ground as he pursued the rabbit, his breath coming in short, excited bursts. He was focused solely on the task at paw, the world around him reduced to the pounding of his heart and the thud of his pawsteps. Branches snapped underfoot, leaves swirled in his wake, and the exhilaration of the hunt filled his senses. The rabbit's zigzagging path challenged his agility and speed, but Shadowpaw was relentless. He anticipated its movements, his mind calculating the rabbit's trajectory with uncanny precision.

And then, with one final, perfectly timed burst of effort, Shadowpaw closed the gap. His outstretched paw connected with the rabbit's hind leg, sending it tumbling to the forest floor. He pounced, his muscles coiling as he landed on top of his prey. The rabbit struggled, its fur a blur of motion, but Shadowpaw's grip was

unyielding. As Shadowpaw returned to where Sandstorm awaited, his chest swelled with a sense of accomplishment. He had faced the challenge head-on, surmounting his fear of heights and proving his worth as a skilled hunter.

Sandstorm nodded her head approvingly then padded back to camp, helping Shadowpaw carry his prey. He padded into camp with his chest puffed out. Even though he was still exhausted, he was able to catch three things and he couldn't help but feel proud of himself.

After he placed his kill in the fresh-kill pile, he saw Sandstorm head up to Firestar's den and couldn't help but wonder if she was so impressed that she's reporting it to him. Perhaps he would become a warrior sooner than he thought.

***

The forest lay still under a blanket of glistening white. Cold air wrapped around the trees, turning the ground into a frosted landscape. Shadowpaw blinked away sleep, his breath visible in the freezing air as he huddled in his nest. The chill seemed to seep into his bones, making him shiver despite the warmth of the den. He peered outside, the world beyond the den transformed into a wonderland. The once-familiar paths were now obscured by a layer of powdery snow. It was as if the forest had been painted in a new, ethereal palette. Every sound seemed muffled by the snow, creating an eerie silence broken only by the occasional creak of branches under the weight of their icy burden.

Shadowpaw's paws felt cold against the den's floor as he ventured outside. The ground crunched under his weight, and he felt a shiver run down his spine. As he padded through the camp, his gaze swept over the familiar sights of the other dens. The Clan was quiet, but he could hear the wind howling along with an occasional hoot of an owl.

He padded back to the apprentice's den and sat down at the entrance. The ice hanging from above clung to the top and barely touched his ears. Finally the rest of the Clan was waking up.

Fernpaw's soft pawsteps drew Shadowpaw's attention as she padded

over to sit beside him. Her fur was fluffed up against the cold, and a small snowflake rested delicately on her nose. She sneezed and her eyes watered for a few moments before she was finally able to see the white landscape. Despite the chill in the air, her eyes held a spark of curiosity and energy.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Fernpaw mewed, her gaze fixed on the snowy earth that stretched before them. "I've never seen the camp like this before. It's like a whole new world.

Shadowpaw nodded in agreement, still amazed himself by how much white covered the forest.

"It'll be interesting hunting in the snow." She murmured before going out and following her mentor.

Shadowpaw widened his eyes. He hadn't thought about that. Snow was quite difficult to walk in, let alone hunt in. He couldn't imagine trying to find prey in the cold. What creatures would possibly be out in this?

Sandstorm's tail flicked invitingly, and Shadowpaw didn't hesitate to follow her out of the den. The cold air immediately prickled his fur, and he felt a shiver run down his spine. He walked briskly beside Sandstorm, his eyes taking in the snowy landscape around them. Everything was draped in a blanket of white, and the familiar scents of the forest were muted by the crispness of the air.

As they reached the edge of their territory, Sandstorm paused, her gaze fixed on the frozen river near Sunningrocks. Shadowpaw followed her line of sight and saw that the river, which was usually a lively current, was now still and frozen over.

"Even in leaf-bare, the Clan needs to eat," Sandstorm meowed, her tone firm but not unkind. "The snow might make it more difficult, but it also gives us an advantage.

Curiosity burned within Shadowpaw as he listened to Sandstorm. He watched as she crouched low, her eyes intent as she scanned the snowy ground. With a swift pounce, she landed on a spot and emerged with a mouse clutched between her jaws.

"See? Prey hides beneath the snow, and we need to know how to find it," Sandstorm explained as she placed the mouse on the ground. "Try it." Sandstorm encouraged, nodding to the snowy ground. "Scent the mouse. Follow its trail with your nose and your instincts."

Taking a deep breath, Shadowpaw crouched down and focused his senses. He closed his eyes momentarily, trying to block out the distractions around him. Then, he took a tentative sniff of the snow, trying to pick up any scent that might be lingering beneath the surface. At first, all he smelled was the cold, crisp scent of leaf-bare. But then, there it was—a faint trace of something. His heart quickened as he followed the scent, his nose leading him forward.

With a burst of excitement, Shadowpaw lunged forward, mimicking Sandstorm's movements. He dug into the snow, his paws striking something soft beneath the surface. When he pulled back, a small vole lay exposed in his jaws.

Chapter Six

The urgency in Bramblepaw's voice sent a jolt of adrenaline through Waterlily's veins. "Quick, Waterlily! Its Sorrelkit. She ate some deathberries!" He exclaimed.

She didn't waste a moment, grabbing the yarrow leaves she needed and bolting out of the medicine den. Her paws barely touched the ground as she sprinted after Bramblepaw, every heartbeat a reminder of the life hanging in the balance. The snow crunched beneath her paws as she ascended the ravine, her breath coming in rapid gasps from the effort. Her eyes were locked on Bramblepaw's form ahead, the urgency in his every step a reflection of the dire situation. Sorrelkit had consumed deathberries, and every heartbeat counted now.

As they reached the spot where Sorrelkit lay, Waterlily's heart clenched. The small kit was trembling, her tiny frame barely moving as she struggled against the effects of the poisonous berries. Firestar's presence nearby only deepened the gravity of the moment, his gaze filled with concern and fear.

Without hesitation, Waterlily knelt beside Sorrelkit. She placed the yarrow leaves in front of the kit's nose, her eyes never leaving Sorrelkit's fragile form. She murmured soothing words. "Come on, Sorrelkit. Just hang on a little bit more." She softly whispered in her ear.

In response to the yarrow's effects, Sorrelkit's body convulsed slightly before she coughed and retched. Waterlily's heart raced as she watched, her eyes filled with worry. She knew that the battle was far from over, that Sorrelkit's body needed to expel the poison completely.

Time seemed to stretch as Waterlily waited, her gaze unwavering as she monitored Sorrelkit's condition. Her touch was gentle as she cleaned the yarrow leaves from the kit's fur, her focus solely on ensuring that every trace of the deadly berries was removed. And

then, as Sorrelkit's breathing steadied and the tension in her body eased, Waterlily felt a surge of relief wash over her. She looked up at Firestar, meeting his worried gaze with a nod of reassurance. Sorrelkit was no longer in immediate danger.

Firestar's gaze softened and led the way back to camp. Sorrelkit was still too weak to travel and so Waterlily took her by the scruff and carried her down the ravine.

The entrance of the medicine den welcomed them with the familiar scent of herbs and warmth. Waterlily eased Sorrelkit down. Then made some soft bedding for her and placed her there to keep her comfortable. She watched Sorrelkit closely, her gaze never wavering as she assessed the kit's condition. She was still breathing heavily, but seemed fine.

Willowpelt padded into medicine den, her eyes filled with worry. "Is she..." She couldn't finish her sentence.

"She'll be fine. I just want to keep an eye on her for the night to ensure that she is well enough." Mewed Waterlily, softly.

"Thank you, Waterlily." Willowpelt purred. "You truly are an amazing medicine cat."

Waterlily softened her eyes and dipped her head in thanks. Willowpelt padded out of the den, knowing that she would be in good paws. Waterlily laid down next to Sorrelkit and purred softly as she closed her eyes to sleep.

As the dawn light filtered through the den, Sorrelkit's eyes gradually opened. Waterlily was awake before, and already had a burdock leaf filled with water in front of Sorrelkit. She lapped up the water, but still looked weak. Sandstorm padded into the den, her ligjt ginger fur glistening from the dawn light. Snow drifted inside the den as she neared the tortoiseshell kit.

"Poor little scrap." She mewed softly.

Firestar then padded in after her and looked down at Sorrelkit. Seeing that that she was awake he lowered his head and gazed

down at her with worry in his eyes. "Can you tell me what happened?"

Waterlily sat just a tail-length behind Sorrelkit and brushed her tail lightly over her flank. "Go ahead little one." She encouraged her.

Sorrelkit looked up at Firestar and blinked at him a few times before responding. "Sootkit and Rainkit were asleep in the nursery." She began in a faint voice. "But I wasn't sleepy. My mother wasn't watching, so I went to play in the ravine. I wanted to catch a mouse. And then I saw Darkstripe." Her voice shook and she hesitated.

"Go on.." Firestar encouraged her, worried on what hee next words might be.

"He was coming up the ravine by himself. I knew he should have had Brackenfur with him, and I…I wondered where he was going. I followed him—I remembered the time he took Bramblepaw and Tawnypaw out of the camp, and I thought I might have an adventure like that, too."

Waterlily softened her eyes. That could have been the kit's last adventure. Though she had always wondered what it was like having kits, she was glad that she didn't have to go through the worry of a mother.

"I followed him." She continued. "I'd never been so far from the camp. I hid from Darkstripe too—he didn't know I was there. And then he met another cat—a cat I'd never seen before."

Waterlily gasped and saw Firestar's same concern. "What other cat?" Was the exact words that she expected Firestar to say.

Sorrelkit looked bewildered. "I didn't recognize the scent." She mewed. Her nose wrinkled. "But it was yucky. He was a big white cat—bigger than you, Firestar. And he had black paws."

Firestar stared at her as he realized whom she had seen. "Blackfoot!" He exclaimed. "Tigerstar's deputy. That was ShadowClan scent you smelled, Sorrelkit."

Waterlily gasped again. She dug her claws into the ground and found herself shifting her paws in anger.

"What was he doing talking to Blackfoot is what I would like to know." Sandstorm hissed, glancing over at Firestar.

Firestar glanced quickly over at her and then back at Sorrelkit. "What happened next?"

"I got scared." Sorrelkit admitted. "I ran back to camp, but I guess Darkstripe heard me and caught up to me in the ravine. I thought he would be angry because I spied on him, but he told me how clever I was. He gave me some red berries for a special treat. They looked tasty, but when I ate them I started to feel really ill…. And I don't remember anything else, except waking up here."

She sank her head on her paws as she finished, as if telling the long story had exhausted her. Waterlily then traced her nose on the kit's flank and checked her breathing. "Those weren't just any kind of berries. Those were deathberries." She explained.

Sorrelkit widened her eyes and laid back her ears in fear. "Deathberries?" She echoed.

"Yes, you must never eat them again." Waterlily urged.

"I won't." The tiny kit mewed tiredly.

"Now get some more rest. You'll be better in no time." Waterlily murmured to her. Then she looked over at Sandstorm and Firestar. "Matters have gotten worse." She whispered. "If we let Darkstripe off with just a warning, Sorrelkit may not be the last kit he does this to."

Chapter Seven

The air outside was crisp, and the sun had just begun its ascent, casting a warm golden hue over the camp. Shadowpaw's heart pounded in his chest as he walked beside Sandstorm, the weight of his impending assessment pressing on him.

As they reached the edge of the hunting grounds, Sandstorm turned to him with a reassuring smile. "Today's assessment will focus on your hunting skills," She explained. "Your task is to catch as much prey as you can within a certain time frame. This will test your ability to track, stalk, and catch your prey swiftly and efficiently." She paused for a short breath. "I will be standing by and watching from a distance."

Shadowpaw's excitement mingled with a touch of nerves. He had practiced tirelessly, honing his senses and perfecting his crouch and pounce techniques. This was his moment to shine, and he was eager to prove himself.

"Remember," Sandstorm added, her green eyes gleaming with confidence, "It's not just about the number of prey you catch, but how well you execute your techniques. Focus on the fundamentals, and your success will follow."

With a nod, Shadowpaw absorbed her words and steeled himself for the challenge ahead. Sandstorm led him to an area dense with undergrowth, providing ample hiding spots for prey. "Your time starts now." She declared. Then she padded away to watch him from a far distance.

Shadowpaw glanced around and pricked his ears, trying to listen to the world around him. Shadowpaw's senses heightened as he crouched low, his gaze fixed on a nearby thicket that was covered with snow icicles. His tail twitched with anticipation, and he waited, letting the cold forest's sounds and scents guide him. A crunch in the snow drew his attention, and his eyes locked onto a vole, busy foraging.

He inched forward, his movements slow. The vole remained unaware of his presence, engrossed in its hunt for food. Shadowpaw's heart raced as he narrowed the distance between them, muscles coiled and ready. He then leaped and caught the vole between his paws. He bit it down on the neck until he felt it go limp. His first catch was successful and he purred with a sense of pride. "Thank you for this catch." He added as he purred.

He then glanced around again. Shadowpaw's eyes locked onto a rabbit grazing in a nearby patch of grass that was brushed through the snow piles. He crouched down and crept slowly, his eyes not leaving sight of it as he went around a large tree to hide. He made sure to keep his tail still as he crept behind it and he peered around, seeing the rabbit was still there nibbling on the grass. He laid back his ears, then coiled up his back haunches then sprung up so fast into the air that the rabbit barely had time to think and run. He dragged the rabbit a few tail-lengths to where he had the vole and buried the rabbit close to it. "Thank you, StarClan." He purred again, then padded off into the opposite direction in hopes to find more. He had to impress Sandstorm or he might not pass.

He was then near Sunningrocks and a familiar scent caught his attention. He gazed over the edge of the river. The river was still frozen over, but the scent that carried into his nostrils was something he had scented before and it wasn't prey. He glanced over the river, and his heartbeat quickened as he finally recognized who the scent belonged to. It was Willowpaw. He twitched his nose and kept his gaze over the river. He kept his cool, knowing that Sandstorm was not too far from him, keeping watch, but he wanted to race over there and see her beautiful, blue eyes once more. He flicked his tail and trudged back through the snow, lifting his muzzle to smell the air again. The cold made his nose sting, but then a scent caught his attention. Another rabbit. He crouched down low and glanced around, trying to figure out where the rabbit might be hiding.

With a sudden burst of speed, he propelled himself forward, his claws slicing through the snow. The rabbit darted away, but Shadowpaw was quick to adjust his trajectory, anticipating its movements. His claws connected with the rabbit's flank, and with a

surge of triumph, he brought it down and killed it with one bite to the neck. He now had three prey. He could definitely get more, but with leaf-bare just beginning, it could be hours before he found something else. Though with his luck today, he might find something rather quickly. He scoped the snowy terrain and pricked his ears in hopes to hear a mouse. He padded slowly, trying to keep his pads soft against the snow to not make much noise.

He stopped and sniffed the air. Nothing. He opened his mouth to taste the air, but still nothing. He could see his breath escaping from his gaping mouth a whisker away in front of him. He closed it, then sniffed the snow beneath him. He wanted to copy Sandstorm, remembering what she did before when she taught him how to hunt mice in the snow, but he couldn't seem to hear them. He waited for what seemed like moons, then he finally heard a tiny shift underneath the snow. He pricked his ears and looked around, ready to pounce as soon as he saw movement. He waited, twitching his nose impatiently.

Then finally he saw something scuffle in the snow and out popped a tiny pink nose just a fox-length away. He tensed every muscle, waiting for the perfect moment to pounce. Then he leaped and caught the mouse beneath the snow just in time before the mouse was able to scurry too far below the snow. He felt a surge of relief as he held the dead mouse in his jaws. He padded over to the burial place of the others and buried that near the other three. He had four prey and he knew that he did well, but it had to satisfy Sandstorm.

Just as Shadowpaw was about to head off and hunt one more time, Sandstorm padded up to him. "You did well." She praised him.

"So... I passed?" He asked, impatiently.

Sandstorm nodded her head slowly. "I believe you did well for leaf-bare." She then padded up Sunningrocks and headed to the place he had buried his prey. Shadowpaw padded after her and picked up the mouse. Sandstorm glanced over at Shadowpaw with a soft green gaze. "We'll come back and pick up the other two later."

Shadowpaw nodded his head silently, the mouse still in his jaws. He

followed Sandstorm back to camp, his heart racing with anticipation. As Shadowpaw settled in camp, his heart still pounding with the satisfaction of his successful assessment, he found his thoughts wandering. His gaze instinctively shifted towards the frozen river, his thoughts drawn to the grey she-cat he had glimpsed there before. Willowpaw of RiverClan had left a mark on his thoughts, and he couldn't help but wonder if their paths would cross again.

His thoughts were momentarily interrupted by the sight of Sandstorm approaching Firestar's den. Shadowpaw's ears pricked, curiosity tugging at him. He wondered if Sandstorm was reporting his success to their leader. A mixture of excitement and nervousness coursed through him. Becoming a warrior was a significant step, and he felt both ready and apprehensive about the responsibilities it would bring. As Sandstorm disappeared into the den, he began thinking og Willowpaw once more. He let his mind wander, imagining the possible future of him and Willowpaw. But then he remembered that they were from different Clans and it was very much impossible.

Chapter Eight

Sandstorm padded back down from the den and flicked her tail, summoning Shadowpaw to her. He padded to her and his eyes were filled with curiosity. "Firestar wants to see you." She mewed, then padded on, leaving Shadowpaw to his thoughts. Shadowpaw widened his eyes in dismay. Was it normal for leaders to speak with the apprentice that was tested? He didn't think it was, but then he thought that maybe he was in trouble for glancing over the frozen river.

Shadowpaw padded over to Firestar's den and announced himself before going inside.

"Come in." He mewed softly, getting up and stretching out his legs.

Shadowpaw padded inside and glanced around. It was much bigger than he had thought. The cave walls were lined with moss and bracken, creating a warm and cozy atmosphere. Firestar was settled at the back, his green eyes warm as he looked over at Shadowpaw.

"Sandstorm was a little worried at your assessment today." Firestar began.

Shadowpaw tilted his head. It was when he was looking across the river. Shadowpaw froze, not knowing what to say.

"She saw you looking over the river as if you were suspecting someone to come out." The tip of his tail twitched with curiosity as he glanced at Shadowpaw's unexpected gaze.

"I thought that I smelled something, and with the river being frozen over, I didn't know if I should have been worried why a RiverClan warrior was so close to the river." He meowed, straightening himself up and narrowing his eyes slightly so that he looked less in shock.

Firestar bought his tiny lie and dipped his head. "Very well. I do

appreciate you being cautious." He paused for a short moment. "I will have your ceremony once all our warriors are in for the night." He added.

Shadowpaw nodded in thanks and padded out of the den. He sighed with relief that Firestar didn't ask him to prove his loyalty to the Clan. His mind then went elsewhere and began thinking of the ceremony later tonight. He felt excitement mingled with nerves. He couldn't wait for night to fall and for his vigil to begin as a new warrior of ThunderClan. He padded over to Sandstorm who was sitting a few tail-lengths from the fresh-kill pile.

She flicked her tail, beckoning him over to her. "Eat something. You deserve it." She purred.

Shadowpaw nodded and looked over the prey that was piled up. Even though it was leaf-bare, the fresh-kill pile seemed rather high. He chose a chaffinch and padded over to Sandstorm, plucking the feathers from its tender body. He ate slowly, hoping to pass some time, but it seemed like it just kept going slower than he had imagined.

"Once you're finished, would you mind giving the elders some fresh bedding?" Asked Sandstorm softly.

Shadowpaw didn't want to do an apprentice's task, but he knew saying no would make him seem ungrateful. He nodded his head in acceptance and gulped down the rest of his chaffinch. Then he got up and padded over to the medicine den. *Waterlily always has extra bedding.* He thought to himself. *Plus I could tell her the great news!*

He padded into the medicine den. Waterlily was getting ready to settle down for the night began putting her stock of herbs in their right places. Then she looked up at Shadowpaw. "What can I do for you, Shadowpaw?"

"I-I just wanted to ask if I could use some of your moss that you have stocked up?" He stuttered, suddenly feeling dumb-founded.

Waterlily nodded her head slowly and closed her eyes purring. "Of course."

As Shadowpaw padded over to the back of the medicine den to grab some moss, he felt Waterlily staring at him. What she reading his thoughts? He looked over his shoulder at her and saw her blink a few times before finally prodding a question. "So you also have good news?"

Shadowpaw tilted his head to the side. "How...how did you know?"

"I could feel your excitement as soon as you walked in." She purred.

Shadowpaw nodded his. "You always know how I'm feeling." He imitated her purr. "I'm going to be made a warrior tonight."

Waterlily closed her eyes in praise. "I am so happy for you! Very well earned."

Shadowpaw dipped his head in thanks then picked up the moss and padded out of the den. Then he trekked to the elders' den and could already hear them speaking of times from their younger days.

"Do you remember the time I caught a frog?" Rasped One-eye.

Shadowpaw dropped the moss in front of his paws. "You caught a frog?" He gasped.

One-eye nodded. "I did. But I let it go as quick as I got it."

Shadowpaw began giving them new moss and rearranging them to make them comfy while listening to One-eye continue her story.

Later that night Shadowpaw heard Firestar's call. "Let all those old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the highrock for a Clan meeting."

Shadowpaw was so excited that he almost ran into the clearing like a kit becoming an apprentice. He sat next to Sandstorm, purring loudly.

"ThunderClan," Firestar began, "we gather here tonight to celebrate a significant moment in the life of our Clan."

Shadowpaw's green eyes were fixed on Firestar, his pulse quickening as he listened intently. He knew that this was the moment he had been working towards, the moment that would mark his transition from apprentice to full-fledged warrior.

"We have a few apprentices that are becoming warriors tonight." Firestar glanced around and softened his gaze towards Thornpaw. "Swiftpaw should have been one of them among Thornpaw today." He meowed with a heavy heart.

"Thornpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code, to defend and to protect your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Thornpaw dipped his head, and closed his eyes in pain, knowing that Swiftpaw would have been standing next to him if Bluestar didn't make him be an apprentice for longer than he should have. "I do." He meowed, looking back at Firestar.

Firestar then continued. "Then by the powers of StarClan, I commend him a warrior in his turn." He paused for a moment. "Thornpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Thornclaw. We welcomes you as a full warrior in ThunderClan."

Firestar jumped down from the highrock. Thornclaw padded up to him. Firestar rested his muzzle on his head and Thornclaw licked his shoulder in response as he has seen his fellow warriors do before him.

Then Firestar glanced back up at the Clan and continued. "Shadowpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Shadowpaw could feel himself begin to tremble. "I do." He meowed. His voice almost sounded hoarse, but just as he spoke, it cleared up.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I commend him a warrior in his turn. Shadowpaw from this moment on, you will be known as..." He paused quickly as if he was thinking of a good name for him. "Shadowheart. You have showed loyalty and respect towards your Clan. We welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

Shadowheart did the same just as he saw Thornclaw do and licked Firestar's shoulder in return once Firestar rested his muzzle on his head.

"Thornclaw! Shadowheart! Thornclaw! Shadowheart!" Yowled the Clan.

Shadowheart stood tall. He was now a full warrior and he couldn't be happier.

Chapter Nine

Firestar then continued. "There's one more ceremony to perform." He flicked his tail to beckon Lostface out of the crowd. Nervously she stepped forward to stand in front of him; Cloudtail followed her, remaining a tail-length or so away.

Waterlily purred with happiness as she knew exactly what was going on. Lostface needed a proper warrior name.

"Spirits of StarClan, you know every cat by name. I ask you now to take away the name from the cat you see before you, for it no longer stands for what she is." Firestar looked at Lostface with a sudden burst of happiness for her. Then he continued as I'd StarClan had just told him her new name. "By my authority as Clan leader." Firestar announced, "And with the approval of our warrior ancestors, I give this cat a new name. From this moment she will be known as Brightheart, for though her body has been gravely injured, we honor her brave spirit and the light that shines on within her."

"Brightheart! Brightheart!" Yowled the Clan.

The moon cast a silvery glow over the camp as Thornclaw and Shadowheart stood side by side, their gazes fixed on the horizon as they sat for vigil. They were both newly appointed warriors, and yet, a sense of unease hung between them. Shadowheart knew that Thornclaw did not like him because he was a loner kit before he came here. Though Thornclaw showed no signs of hostility towards him tonight.

"Well deserved you two." Purred Frostfur. Then she padded off back into the nursery.

Shadowpaw purred softly as he heard his mother praise him. Though Frostfur was not his actual mother, he did love her as if she was. Shadowheart closed his eyes, letting his other senses take over. The sounds of the night rustled around him-the whisper of the wind

through the trees, and the distant hoot of an owl. As he opened his eyes, Shadowheart let his gaze sweep over the shapes of the dens, the moonlight casting ethereal patterns on their surfaces.

He settled himself more comfortably, mindful of the chill seeping through his paws from the ground. He curled tail over his front paws and fluffed out his fur to help with the cold air. As the moon journeyed across the sky, time seemed to stretch. As Shadowheart sat in the stillness of the night, his thoughts wandered to Willowpaw from RiverClan once again. Her image seemed to materialize in his mind, her fur glistening like the water that flowed through her Clan's territory. He recalled the moments they had shared during Gathering, then the brief time they had a quarter moon ago.

As he gazed at the moon, he found himself imagining her by his side, sharing stories of their respective Clans and the challenges they faced. The thought of her soft blue eyes meeting his green gaze sent a thrill through him, even as he acknowledged the complexities of their different paths. Shadowheart's heart swelled with a mixture of longing and uncertainty. He had chosen ThunderClan and embraced their way of life, but his connection to Willowpaw lingered like a whisper on the wind. *Could there ever be a bridge between their worlds, or were they destined to remain as separate as the rivers that divided their territories*?

With a sigh, Shadowheart shook his head, as if trying to clear his thoughts. The reality of their situations was undeniable. But he couldn't help but feel that they were destined to be together. As the night wore on and the stars began to fade, Shadowheart's gaze remained fixed on the horizon. The moon cast a soft glow over the camp. He knew that the challenges of being a warrior would demand his full attention, but for that fleeting moment, he allowed himself to imagine a world where boundaries could be crossed and connections could be forged, even against all odds. He thought about having kits and them growing up to be apprentices and then warriors of their own.

As the hours stretched on and the night remained still, Shadowheart kept on thinking. He felt like his mind would never stop, but finally he heard a crack of a stick and he immediately prickled his ears,

turning his head to where the sound had come from. He opened his mouth to taste the air. It was just a squirrel jumping from branch to branch.

He then kept listening to the sounds of the night. His ears were still alert. A hoot of an owl sounded a few fox-lengths ahead and then wings fluttering in the distance from a bird traveling south of their camp.

Snow began to fall again and snowflakes hit his nose. He scrunched his muzzle and sneezed as one landed just on his nostril. He glanced over at Thornclaw and saw that he was memorized by the snowfall as if he has never seen such small flakes before.

He sat there, vigilant, his breath visible in the chilly air. The trees stood tall and bare, their branches etched against the pale sky. It was a stark reminder that leaf-bare still held its grip on the land, refusing to relinquish its hold. Despite the quiet and the cold, there was a sense of peace in the air, as if the world was holding its breath in anticipation of the sun's return.

With each passing moment, the light grew stronger, casting long shadows across the camp. The frost that had coated the ground began to melt, turning the frozen earth into patches of dampness. The air slowly began to warm, but the bite of leaf-bare still lingered.

Sandstorm padded out of the den and over to the newly appointed warriors. "Morning." She purred. "You may speak now." She prompted.

"Was it cold?" Mewed Fernpaw as she padded out of the apprentices' den.

"Very!" Hissed Thornclaw.

Shadowheart couldn't think of anything to say. His thoughts kept going back to Willowpaw and what life could like with her. But then he shook his head again to clear it. "I'm just glad to get some sleep." He meowed hoarsely.

Sandstorm nodded her head in agreement. "I bet. Go ahead and get some sleep."

Shadowheart saw Thornclaw shot her an angry glance as if he didn't want her telling him what to do. To try and avoid any conflicts, Shadowheart spoke before Thornclaw could oppose. "Thank you Sandstorm." Then he padded off to the apprentices' den, but then remembered that he was a warrior now and turned to go the warrior's den. Finding a spot might be difficult, but he was happy to be just anywhere to sleep. His mind was more exhausted than anything.

An empty nest that smelled stale caught his attention. He padded over to it. It was in the far back of the den, but it felt warm and quiet. He bent down and sniffed it. *This used to be Firestar's nest.* He mewed half to himself.

He made it comfy again, and tucked in his paws under his chest as he laid down. Then he closed his eyes and let the thoughts of being a warrior fill his mind. But instead he began to dream of a pretty she-cat with bright blue eyes.

Chapter Ten

Waterlily's heart felt lighter as she led Sorrelkit back to her mother, Willowpelt. As she approached the nursery, she noted the warm, familiar scent of the kits and their queen. Willowpelt lay there, her eyes bright with concern and love as she watched over her other two kits, Rainkit and Sootkit. The moment Waterlily entered, Willowpelt's gaze shifted to Sorrelkit, and her eyes widened in both surprise and relief.

"Waterlily," she meowed softly, a tremor of emotion in her voice. "You've brought her back." Willowpelt rose, her motherly instincts instantly taking over as she nuzzled Sorrelkit affectionately. "My precious one, I was so worried."

"Sorrelkit is strong and brave," Waterlily assured Willowpelt, her gaze filled with admiration for the kit's resilience. "She's going to grow into a remarkable warrior one day."

Willowpelt purred softly, her gaze filled with maternal pride. "Thank you, Waterlily. You've saved her, and I'll never forget that."

Waterlily purred lightly and dipped her head, then padded off back to the medicine den. It was half-moon tonight and she was just about ready to set off for the Moonstone.

The path to the Moonstone was well-worn and familiar, yet it retained an aura of reverence. Tall trees formed an archway overhead, their branches weaving together like a protective canopy. Moonbeams filtered through the leaves, casting dappled patterns on the forest floor. The night air was cool and crisp, carrying with it the earthy scent of leaves and the distant murmur of the river. Waterlily's paws, though experienced, moved with care, avoiding stray twigs and leaves that might betray her presence. She was not alone on this journey; she carried the hopes and worries of ThunderClan with her.

Then she was joined by another cat. She lifted her muzzle and she

padded through the snow, wondering why it didn't smell like Runningnose, but more like someone else she didn't expect to smell. *Littlecloud*. She could now sense him following her. She stopped and looked back, with wide eyes.

"Littlecloud?" She mewed, tilting her head to the side. Runningnose padded beside him.

"H-hey." His purr muffled into a spurt, then he cleared his throat. "How are you, Waterlily?"

"What are you doing?" She completely ignored his attempt to be subtle about his sudden appearance and walking by her side now.

"Going to the Moonstone, like you." He narrowed his eyes as if he expected her to be happier for him.

Waterlily tensed and continued on towards the Moonstone in silence. She led the way, dipping her paws into a nearby stream that was finally beginning thaw out from the frozen earth, then up the hill where the Moonstone lay. She padded inside, not really wanting to talk to Littlecloud. She was afraid of catching feelings again like before.

Barkface and Mudfur were already waiting for them just before the tunnel. "Hello, Waterlily." Purred Mudfur.

Waterlily dipped her head in greeting then sat down, wrapping her tail over her front paws. Once she settled, Runningnose sat beside her, and all eyes turned to Littlecloud as he sat beside Runningnose. "A new medicine cat?" It was Barkface who asked the question from the silence of the cats.

Runningnose nodded his head. "Yes. He is in training."

Waterlily widened her eyes in dismay. "You're going to be a medicine cat? But why?" Not that she didn't want him to be a medicine cat, but he was already a full warrior. It's unheard of.

"You cured Whitethroat and I." He began, "I was so impressed with your skills and knowledge that I wanted to be just like you."

Waterlily softened her eyes and wanted to melt with honor. She knew that she had knack for herbs, but she never knew it made an impact on someone else before like that. "Thank you, Littlecloud. I am honored." She dipped her head in thanks.

Mudfur and Barkface glanced at one another, but didn't say anything more. Waterlily guessed that they were shocked a medicine cat would save another cat from a different Clan. She then looked up at silverpelt and then back at the other cats. "We should get started while the moon is still out."

The others nodded in agreement and then she padded inside the tunnel first. Barkface followed after her, then the others. Waterlily stood patiently inside, her gaze fixed on the glistening rock walls that surrounded her. Then Runningnose padded inside with Littlecloud following behind. The mystical glow of the Moonstone's walls bathed him in silvery light, casting intricate shadows that danced around the sacred space. He followed closely behind his mentor, Runningnose, his heart heavy with the significance of this moment.

Waterlily observed the young apprentice with a knowing smile, remembering the mix of excitement and fear that she had felt when she first laid eyes on the Moonstone. It was a place where medicine cats connected with StarClan, and sought guidance. The experience was both humbling and spiritually uplifting. She purred softly as Runningnose said the ancient words of StarClan. "I, Runningnose, stand before you, StarClan, with this young cat who has shown the qualities and potential to be a worthy medicine cat. I have chosen them to be my apprentice." He paused as if he couldn't think of the rest of the words, but then he continued. "Is it your wish to enter the mysteries of StarClan as a medicine cat?"

Littlecloud nodded his head. "It is." He purred.

"Warriors of StarClan, I present you with this apprentice. They have chosen the path of a medicine cat. Grant them your wisdom and insight so that they may understand your ways and heal their Clan in accordance with your will." He finished, beckoning Littlecloud to touch the cold stone walls before everyone else.

Once he did so, Barkface and Mudfur touched their noses as well. Waterlily then did the same, and closed her eyes letting the world of StarClan take over her dreams. As Waterlily's consciousness drifted into the dreamlike realm, she expected the usual connection with StarClan, the soft voices of her ancestors, and the comforting presence of their wisdom. However, what she encountered was entirely unexpected.

Before her materialized a vision of a black cat, his silhouette standing out sharply against the moonlit landscape. His form began to shimmer and waver like moonlight on water. Strange and unsettling images flashed before Waterlily's eyes, like fragmented pieces of a puzzle trying to assemble themselves into coherence.

She saw ThunderClan's camp, bathed in an eerie, blood-red light, the trees around it black and twisted as if with sickness. Warriors moved about, but their eyes gleamed with an unnatural, malevolent light. The very air seemed heavy with foreboding.

A shadowy figure loomed in the center of the camp, a feline shape that was both familiar and foreign. It was Shadowheart, yet somehow not the Shadowheart she knew. His eyes gleamed with an eerie, otherworldly radiance. He stood before a group of cats, his voice filled with a dark power, compelling them to follow his every command.

Then she remembered what Spottedleaf had once told her and now she was afraid that maybe her fear had come true. He would be much like his father, Tigerstar.

Chapter Eleven

Jab! She widened her eyes and let out a spurt of anger. *Jab*! She felt it in her side again. She looked around, not knowing what was poking her in the side. *Jab*!

She stirred, blinking her eyes open to the soft glow from the moon filtering through the den's entrance. The first thing she registered was Firestar's familiar face peering down at her, his green eyes filled with a sense of urgency. With a quiet yawn and a stretch, she pushed herself into a sitting position, sleep still clinging to her mind. "Firestar," She greeted, her voice laden with sleepiness as she tried to make sense of the late night disturbance. "What brings you here so late?"

Firestar's expression was grave as he lowered his head to her level. "Waterlily, I need your counsel," He began, his voice hushed but urgent. "There's something that happened at the Gathering."

Waterlily nodded and followed Firestar to his den. She felt like going back to sleep, but she knew it was urgent if Firestar mentions the Gathering so late at night.

Waterlily nodded in understanding as Firestar explained the ominous clouds that had gathered over their territory. "And as I was telling the Clans about Tigerstar's treacheries, he ends it by saying it's a bad sign from StarClan." He finished with a soft hiss.

Whitestorm lifted his muzzle. "It might have been a sign," Mewed Whitestorm thoughtfully. "But one that shows StarClan are angry with Tigerstar."

Waterlily listened intently, absorbing the gravity of the situation. The clouds overhead seemed to mirror the turmoil in her heart on how she felt about Tigerstar.

"What do you think, Waterlily?" Came the question from Firestar.

Waterlily looked up in dismay as if she was not actually paying attention. "I don't know." She mewed. "If it was a sign, it would mean StarClan stopped you from telling the truth. But StarClan wouldn't do that. He has to be trying to keep everyone still under his leadership."

"No, I don't want to believe that either." Firestar agreed. Then he raised to his paws as if an idea had aroused his whiskers. "We could, however, address the *TigerClan* problem."

Waterlily twitched her whiskers and shuffled her paws in confusion. "Meaning?"

"We can make an alliance." He paused for a moment, looking at both cats. "With WindClan."

Waterlily nodded, her mind racing with the potential consequences of such a move. "You're right, Firestar. If we can secure WindClan as an ally, it might bring harmony back to our territories." She remembered when Firestar, Fireheart at the time, tried to get Bluestar to form an alliance with WindClan.

Firestar agreed, his eyes filled with resolve. "I'll speak to Tallstar at the next Gathering."

Waterlily was then confused as to why so long of a wait to tell him, but she quickly let that slip away as she began to think of going back to sleep.

Whitestorm dipped his head and padded out of the den. Waterlily was about to follow him, but was interrupted by paw. "Wait, Waterlily, would you?" Waterlily nodded and sat back down, wrapping her tail over her front paws. "Will there ever be an end to this?"

Waterlily pressed her muzzle comfortingly against his. "I don't know. It's in the paws of StarClan." She narrowed her gaze. "But sometimes I don't believe there'll be any peace in the forest until Tigerstar is dead." She knew that Firestar agreed though he didn't say so. He had fell silent like maybe he couldn't do it.

Waterlily dipped her head then padded back to the medicine den. As she settled into her mossy nest, she couldn't help but carry the warmth of her dream with her. As she lay in the quiet of the medicine den, her thoughts turned to the rise of TigerClan and how they would address forming LionClan with WindClan. But then to her surprise, that quickly went away from her mind as she began thinking of Littlecloud and how honored she was that he became a medicine cat because of her.

She let herself drift back to sleep and began to dream. She thought that she would dream of Littlecloud, but to her surprise, it was the same set up as the dream she had in StarClan half a moon ago. She widened her eyes and looked around as the camp she knew and loved was filled with blood. ThunderClan camp had transformed into a horrifying scene of chaos and despair. Blood, like a dark river, stained the once-pure earth. The scent of fear and battle hung heavily in the air.

She cast her gaze around, taking in the gruesome details of the dream. Cats she had known, warriors she had tended to, lay lifeless and broken. The camp, once bustling with life, was now eerily silent. The hollow feeling in her chest grew as she realized the magnitude of the tragedy unfolding before her.

Desperation gripped her heart. She wanted to call out, to understand what had transpired, but her voice was trapped in her throat. All she could do was bear witness to the suffering and loss. She couldn't even move to try and help those who were wounded. Then she saw Shadowheart once more. His shape looming in the shadows. He turned to face her, his green eyes blazing like fire. Waterlily wanted to scream out at him, but again, her voice was still somehow trapped.

She shook her head to clear it, then she blinked open her eyes from the horrid nightmare. She scrambled to her paws and glanced outside her den. The dawn light was just beginning to peer through the trees and onto the camp. The dawn patrol was getting started on their day and headed up the ravine. Waterlily padded to the entrance of her den and waited to see if Shadowheart was awake yet, but she couldn't see him. *He probably wouldn't be up till sun high*. She thought to herself, bitterly.

Waterlily was so wrapped in thought that she had barely noticed Shadowheart padding out of the den. He followed the patrol up the ravine. She pricked her ears and followed her gaze to where he was heading, but she quickly lost sight of him once he headed out of the gorse tunnel. She padded after him, wondering what he may be up to now and if her dreams were right about him causing all the bloodshed.

Chapter Twelve

Shadowheart padded with quiet determination as he ventured out of the camp in the early light of dawn. Shadows clung to his sleek black fur, masking his presence as he slipped through the gorse tunnel and into the territory beyond. His thoughts were consumed by the promise he had made to Willowpaw from RiverClan who had captured his heart.

Shadowheart moved stealthily through the familiar snowy terrians. As he neared the iced river, his heart quickened with anticipation. He finally spotted her sitting by the water's edge, her gray fur glowing softly in the early morning light. Her blue eyes sparkled with a mix of relief and curiosity as she noticed Shadowheart approaching.

"Sorry, I'm late." He meowed, dipping his head in apology.

"I had thought maybe something had happened to you." She replied softly. "Shadowheart, now, eh?" She added teasingly.

Shadowheart nodded. "Yeah, it's official. I'm a warrior." He boasted.

Willowpaw purred with acceptance. "I love your warrior name." Then she looked up and saw clouds beginning to darken. "I wonder what my warrior name would be..."

"Whatever it may be, it will suit you very well." He purred, pressing his nose into her flank.

Willowpaw closed her eyes and purred for a few moments before having to dip her head goodbye. Shadowheart watched her leave until he could no longer see her. Then he padded back into camp, his head hung low in sorrow that they had to make their secret meeting so short.

Shadowheart padded gracefully through the camp. Snow crunched beneath his paws.

He couldn't help but feel like he wasn't needed in ThunderClan now that he was a warrior. Sandstorm would acknowledge him every now and then, but he missed having a purpose and a goal each day. Firestar didn't ask him to go on any patrols, so he was mainly on his own.

He thought about going back to the den and resting for a bit before asking to join a patrol, but he saw Waterlily blinking blankly at him as he passed by her den. He stared back in confusion for a few short moments, then continued on towards the warriors' den.

"Shadowheart." Called out Waterlily.

Shadowheart stopped in his tracks and softly sighed, not knowing what to expect.

"I've noticed you been slipping out of camp again." She mewed quietly, looking around and making sure that no other cat was within ear shot.

"Oh." He mewed, not sure if he should tell her the truth or not. "I...uh..." He paused for a moment, then realized that she would find out anyways. "I've been seeing Willowpaw in secret from RiverClan."

Waterlily's eyes widened in shock. "Willowpaw?"

Shadowheart nodded. "I saw her on a patrol while I was still an apprentice." He explained, shuffling one of his paws to and fro a few times.

Waterlily looked down at the ground as if she was deep in thought, then looked back up at him and met Shadowheart's green gaze. "Very well. Please just be careful."

Shadowheart tilted his head to the side. Was she really letting this go? She didn't even try to stop him. He then nodded his head in acceptance, then padded off back to his nest. He was focused on Waterlily's response that he barely noticed Sandstorm calling out his name.

"Do you have bees in your brain?" Hissed Sandstorm. Shadowheart

looked up and blinked a few times in confusion. Sandstorm then continued. "Would you like to join our hunting patrol?" She asked, almost with a glare.

Shadowheart nodded his head in silence. He could feel her frustration with him as he followed her to the middle of the clearing. Brackenfur and Tawnypaw were waiting for them and got to their paws once they saw Sandstorm arrive. "Alright. Let's go." She flicked her tail and padded up the snowy ravine.

The air stung Shadowheart's nose as he breathed it in and it almost made him sneeze. The journey was silent for the most part, the only sounds being the soft crunch of snow and the occasional chirping of a distant bird. Shadowheart couldn't help but feel the weight of Sandstorm's expectations on his shoulders. He was a skilled hunter in her eyes, but he was distracted from his meeting with Willowpaw.

Shadowheart's gaze drifted over to the frozen river as they neared Sunningrocks. He couldn't see Willowpaw, nor smell her, but half of him wished that he did see her.

"Brackenfur," Tawnypaw whispered. "I've found rabbit tracks. Should I try to flush it out?"

Brackenfur nodded and signaled for her to go ahead. Shadowheart felt jealous that she found something first. He was distracted again. He shook his head to clear it, and watched in dismay as Tawnypaw caught the rabbit just as it tried to escape through the brambles.

"Nice work!" Praised Sandstorm. "You're turning out to be a great hunter." She purred.

Tawnypaw let out a purr of satisfaction, while Shadowheart stood with his head hung low. He was, however, pleased that she had caught the rabbit. Though he wished that he could have caught the scent before she did. He lifted his muzzle, but could sense nothing.

Tawnypaw did the same and flicked her tail towards a small pile of moving snow. Brackenfur nodded his head again and she immediately went into the hunter's crouch. Shadowheart stood still

until she was far enough to not mess her up, and pricked his ears. He couldn't hear anything. He felt like he had lost all of his senses. Tawnypaw let out another purr rumble in her throat as a mouse dangled from her jaws.

The rest of the day seemed to go the same. Shadowheart didn't catch a thing while Tawnypaw, Brackenfur and Sandstorm were able to find all sorts of prey. Once Shadowheart padded back into camp and dropped off a mouse that Sandstorm had caught into the fresh-kill pile.

He laid in his nest, with a paw crossed over the other and his chin rested on his legs. His mind was still racing, though it wasn't about Willowpaw this time. *Was StarClan trying to punish me by taking away my sense of smell and hearing?* The thought made him shiver, wondering if StarClan had that kind of power.

Chapter Thirteen

Shadowheart lay in his nest, his green eyes wide open in the darkness of the warriors' den. The pelt of the cat beside him, soft and warm, rose and fell rhythmically with each peaceful breath. But for him, sleep remained elusive, as did the answers to the questions that had plagued his mind. He rose to his paws, trying not to wake Cinderpelt that laid beside him in the other nest.

Shadowheart tiptoed out of the den and padded into the clearing. He stood in the moonlit clearing, his gaze fixed on the shimmering tapestry of stars above. Silverpelt stretched across the sky.

He longed to see Willowpaw, to share moments under the moon, but responsibility and the impending warrior's assessment weighed heavily on her shoulders. She needed her rest, and he respected that. Still, the absence of their secret meetings left him feeling more isolated than ever. Though it was just for one night, it seemed long without her. Each passing moment felt like eternity.

A soft sigh escaped Shadowheart's lips as he recalled the times they had shared together. The laughter, the whispered conversations, the tender moments when their eyes had met under the moon's gentle gaze.

He found himself closing his eyes and thinking of what his future might be with her. Then he remembered that they were from different Clans. The warrior code forbids two Clans to be together. He reopened his eyes and looked up at silverpet once more. As the night wore on, Shadowheart's thoughts became dark. No matter how much he cared for Willowpaw, it couldn't be. He shook his head to clear it, then pushed away all the thoughts that haunted him. He turned away from the moonlit clearing and padded into the warriors' den.

As he settled back into his nest, he sought it would be best to focus more on ThunderClan than it was on his heart. For all he knew,

ThunderClan might need him more than ever.

***

"With Darkstripe now a prisoner, Fernpaw doesn't have a mentor." Meowed Dustpelt just outside the warriors' den.

Firestar dipped his head. "Yes, I will appoint her one right away." He agreed, then flicked his tail and jumped up onto the highrock. Fernpaw followed him.

Shadowheart padded out of the den and blinked a few times, letting himself adjust to the bright sun. Once he was accustomed to the brightness, his gaze made its way slowly toward Firestar and Fernpaw. He could hear them still speaking.

"Longtail." Firestar yowled.

Longtail looked up from a mid wash, and pricked his ears in alarm when he heard his name. He got to his paws and padded over to Firestar who was sitting on the highrock, his green gaze fixed on Longtail. Longtail glanced over at Fernpaw, then back at Firestar, letting him speak. "You have been without an apprentice since Swiftpaw's passing. You were an excellent mentor to him. I know you'll do great with Fernpaw as well."

Longtail dipped his head and turned to Fernpaw. He purred loudly and bowed his head a little so Fernpaw could reach him as she touched his nose in acceptance.

Shadowheart stretched out his paws and yawned. He softly shook his body, to shake away some sleepiness still clinging on to him. It was just sun high. Though the day already started, Shadowheart decided to go hunting again. Since his hunting patrol went so poorly for him, he wanted to feel important again by bringing back some prey for the Clan. But this time, he would be alone.

Shadowheart padded across the snowy clearing and up the ravine in solitude. No one stopped him. He padded out of the gorse tunnel and down toward the great oak tree. Though it was leaf-bare, some mice or squirrels would still want some of the nuts that grew near

it. Once he got closer, he went into the hunter's crouch, his ears flattened against his head. He slowly swept his gaze across the white blanket of snow. He hoped to pick up at least a scent of prey, but nothing. He laid motionless for a good long moment before finally picking up the slightest scent of squirrel. His scent was back.

He pricked his ears and slowly stood up, careful not to make any noise in the crunchy snow. Then something brown darted across the snowy terrain and scampered up the tree trunk. Shadowheart leaped and caught the squirrel mid jump in his jaws. He bit down and killed it swiftly. He landed gracefully as dusts of snow scattered around him. He dropped his squirrel and bowed his head, closing his eyes. "Thank you StarClan for this catch." He purred softly, then padded back to camp with his prized possession.

He dropped his squirrel in the fresh-kill pile and let another small purr rumble in his throat and he padded over to Firestar, who was sharing tongues with Sandstorm. "Are there any patrols for me to join this evening?" He mewed, politely dipping his head.

Firestar glanced up at him with wide eyes as if he asked him a hard question. Then he dipped his head in return. "You can join Whitestorm's evening border patrol." He suggested.

"Great. I'll join it." He looked around camp, his gaze stopping on a white tom grooming himself at the edge of the clearing where the sunlight gleams upon his fur. He padded over to him and dipped his head in greeting. "Firestar mentioned that I could go with you on the evening patrol." He mewed, carefully.

Whitestorm observed him with a steady gaze, his blue eyes reflecting wisdom. "Welcome aboard." He meowed in a deep rumbling voice. "We'll be heading out once the sun begins to dip below the horizon."

Shadowheart nodded his head, showing he understood, then padded back to the warriors' den and sat just outside the entrance. He groomed himself, licking his paw, then swiping it over his face. Once he was finished, he looked up at the sun. It was still above the horizon and he had hours more to go before dusk. His mind then began to wonder as he stared out into the clearing. *What if I'm not*

meant to be in ThunderClan, but in RiverClan?

Chapter Fourteen

Waterlily found herself standing in the midst of a field unlike any she had ever seen before. Instead of lush green grass, this eerie expanse was covered in bones—bones of cats. The air felt heavy with an unsettling chill that sent shivers down her spine. She was terrified, but an unspoken urge pushed her to continue forward.

Her eyes were drawn to a particular figure in the distance—a sleek, black tom. He stood out amidst the bone-laden landscape, his fur almost obsidian against the ghostly white of the bones.

The black tom didn't move. He simply stood there, his gaze piercing and intense. Waterlily felt a mixture of dread and curiosity coursing through her. She had questions, but the tom remained silent, his eyes turned away from her into her as if he didn't want to look at her in the eyes.

Waterlily took a tentative step closer. The ground beneath her paws crunched with each movement,and the symphony of bones underlining her unease. She couldn't help but wonder what this eerie field represented, who the black tom was, and why she was here. She's had weird dreams from StarClan, but nothing like this.

As she drew nearer to the black tom, an odd feeling of familiarity washed over her. The sleek contours of his body, the way his fur glistened in the unearthly light of the moon—it all reminded her of someone she knew well. Her heart quickened, and her breath caught in her throat as she dared to entertain a thought she couldn't quite comprehend.

Shadowheart. It can't be Shadowheart. She thought to herself, padding around him to see his eyes. But once she reached the front of him, his eyes were darkened and round as if he was soulless. She then saw a collar around his neck. It lined with bones as if it was supposed to tie everyone of his ancestors with him.

The black tom's jaws parted, revealing sharp, gleaming teeth, but no

words emerged. Instead, his gaze intensified, conveying a silent message that seemed to resonate within the very core of her being. *Shadowheart was not to be trusted!*

She quickly scrambled to her paws and looked around. She was alone in her den. She sighed with relief, but she no longer felt that Shadowheart was taking the right path. She feared that letting him go was the absolute worst thing she could have done.

Waterlily's heart pounded in her chest. Instead of keeping it in like she normally does, she padded into the clearing and up to Firestar's den. "Firestar." She meowed, "It's Waterlily. Can I come in?" She tried to hide her urgency, but Firestar already knew.

"Of course. Tell me everything." He replied sitting up just beside his nest.

Waterlily recited her dream. "I saw bones of cats scattered in a field." She began. "At first I thought it was the same dream as you had, but then I saw a cat. I think it was Shadowheart."

"I had the same message, except the black tom with bones around his neck is new and unsettling." He confessed, twitching his tail eagerly.

Waterlily could feel herself begin to tremble with fear. She didn't know if she feared Tigerstar or Shadowheart becoming a villain more. Firestar's response didn't help much either. He held her gaze as if he was thinking of something to say, but silence kept them both trapped in thought for a long moment.

"Do you think it could be Shadowheart?" She finally mewed, trying not to sound too concerned.

Waterlily's gaze remained fixed on Firestar as he pondered the implications of her unsettling vision. His ginger fur glowed in the soft light of his den, but his expression was one of deep contemplation. The silence stretched, hanging between them like a heavy fog.

"I am not sure," Firestar finally spoke, his voice echoed in the den.

"But if it is, we must watch him from now on."

Waterlily nodded, her heart heavy with concern. She understood the necessity of caution, even if she secretly harbored her own reservations. She had known Shadowheart for a long time, seen him grow from an apprentice to a warrior, and now she feared the unknown path he might be treading.

With a final nod, Waterlily turned away, and she left Firestar to his thoughts.

Waterlily then, stood alone in the clearing, her thoughts whirling like autumn leaves in a gusty wind. The weight of her recent visions and Firestar's cryptic response pressed upon her, leaving her feeling as though she were caught in a web of uncertainty. Her gaze wandered toward the camp's entrance, where she often observed Shadowheart's comings and goings.

The conflict within her raged like a storm. On one paw, she was the loyal medicine cat of ThunderClan, entrusted with the well-being of her Clanmates. On the other, she had known Shadowheart since he was a kit, and her heart ached at the thought of betraying his trust. What if there was a reasonable explanation for his actions? What if she was misinterpreting her visions?

Then she shook her head to clear it. If she did, then there's someone out there that looks too identical to Shadowheart. And it wasn't Tigerstar. Which is what Waterlily fears the most.

Chapter Fifteen

Snow began to fall, making the forest look as if it had a white blanket covering the trees and ground. Pawprints laid all around camp, making paths everywhere to help others walk around camp easily. Shadowheart padded out of the warriors' den and fluffed out his fur, making him look bigger. "Brr!" He shouted half to himself.

Cloudtail padded up behind him. "I've heard leaf-bare is usually pretty bad on prey. Let's just pray that it stays good in this snow storm." He murmured, brushing past Shadowheart.

Shadowheart nodded in agreement. "I just wish it wasn't so cold." He added. Cloudtail padded off into the distance, making a new set of paw prints as the old ones began to disappear.

"Are you ready?" Mewed Cinderpelt. She padded up to him, still limping a bit.

Shadowheart nodded and yawned at the same. Cinderpelt flicked her tail and Shadowheart followed behind her to the middle of the clearing. Thornclaw and Cinderpelt were already in the middle of the clearing, while Mousefur padded up behind them. "Let's get going before the storm gets any worse." Mousefur mumbled as she began padding up the ravine.

Shadowheart's breath was visible in the chilly air as he followed the hunting patrol up the ravine. Snow crunched beneath his paws, making drafts of snow sust all around him. Mousefur quickened the pace and Shadowheart almost had trouble keeping up. He breathed a little heavier this time as he raced after them into the thick forest.

"You're going to scare all the prey away." Hissed Mousefur.

Shadowheart stopped in his tracks and panted. "Sorry." He mumbled, taking one finale deep breath. He puffed out his chest and waited for further directions.

Thornclaw sat down on the cold snow and swished his tail impatiently. "These conditions might force prey to hide."

Mousefur stood beside him. "Then search under rocks, and just look for any signs of movement." She hissed, scowling at the blanket of snow. "But there's definitely nothing over here. "We'll try by Sunningrocks."

Shadowheart didn't mind the snow. It didn't bother him. He followed them reluctantly through the snow. They ventured deeper into the forest, their pawprints gradually disappearing beneath the accumulating snow. Snow fell faster, making it hard to see anything a few tail-lengths in front of them. They padded a little slower once they reached the hill leading up to Sunningrocks.

Cinderpelt was the first to spot something dart across the snow. It was a mouse. She pounced, but the mouse was too fast and disappeared into the roots of the trees. Then she let out a sigh of frustration. Mousefur let out a hiss and padded down towards the frozen river. She crouched down and sniffed her way beside the river. Thornclaw padded after her and could smell a rabbit warren just a tail-length ahead. He dug into the ground, furiously. Mousefur joined him. They reached the bottom, but found only empty snow-choked tunnels.

Shadowheart put his nose to the test and finally got a scent of vole scampering to a pile of white-crisped, fallen leaves. He dug his claws into the soft snow, making him able to run through the snow. He jumped and landed on the vole. He bit down and killed it swiftly. He padded back towards them and dropped it below his paws. "Not much here either. But I did manage get a vole."

Thornclaw rolled his eyes as if he was jealous. Mousefur nodded her head in gratitude and scanned the ground again before finally giving up. "Alright." She sighed. "Let's go back to camp. We can't find anything more in this snow storm."

Thornclaw reluctantly agreed, while Cinderpelt nodded in full agreement knowing her injured leg would act up again if they continued for much longer.

Snow clung to their fur as they padded through the gorse tunnel and down the ravine. Shadowheart carried his vole into camp. Eyes were locked onto the empty mouths of the patrol as they padded into the middle of the clearing. Firestar padded out of his den and greeted them with a slight nod. "Not much out there with the storm getting worse." Reported Mousefur.

Firestar softly sighed, feeling their frustration. "We have no choice but to wait till it passes. So no more hunting patrols until then." He glanced around and saw other cats beginning to gather around. He jumped up onto the highrock and didn't bother calling for a Clan meeting. "No hunting patrols until the storm passes." He ordered. "But some border patrols can still continue. We don't need any other Clans thinking we're letting our guard down." He finished, then leaped back down to Mousefur. He dipped his head in thanks, then padded towards Sandstorm who was sitting at the edge of the clearing.

Shadowheart took his vole to the fresh-kill pile and dropped it. It was low and had only another vole, a mouse and a plump squirrel. Not much at all to feed a whole Clan. Shadowheart sighed, and went to his nest with an empty stomach. He laid down his head on his paws and closed his eyes, letting sleep take over him.

He opened his eyes slowly and saw that everyone else was still asleep. He could hear soft breathing around him as he got to his paws and shook out his fur. He made his way around the zig zags pathway through the cats and padded out of the den, with his head drooped down from sleepiness. He then shook out his fur again to wake himself up and looked up. Snow had stopped falling down from silverpelt, and the air thinned. The snow sparkled that laid on the ground and made Shadowheart's dark pelt show all too well.

He covered himself snow, then padded through the clearing and up the ravine to where cats go to make dirt. He made his way up and passed the dirt place, heading out of camp. Snow clung to his fur, making it look like he was severely matted. Once he reached Sunningrocks, he shook out his snow covered pelt and let all the snow disappear from his fur. It was smooth again, and laid flat on his body from the small bit of wetness of the snow.

He padded down the hill and waited till he saw a grey pelt in the distance padding closer to him. He stood up and greeted her with a purr. "It's so good to see you again."

Willowpaw sat beside him leaned against his soft fur. "And you as well." She replied.

"Did you receive your warrior name?" He asked, looking into her blue eyes.

Willowpaw nodded. "Yes, I'm Willowbreeze now." She puffed out his chest as she boasted.

Shadowheart closed his eyes and let the name sink into his thoughts. "It's a beautiful name." He mewed softly, opening his eyes again. Shadowheart then heard crunching noises a few fox-lengths behind them. "Go." He whispered, then turned to face the intruder.

A long-haired calico came out into view and her amber eyes were wide with amazement. "Waterlily?" He meowed in shock.

Waterlily blinked away her shock and narrowed her eyes in frustration. "Shadowheart, you can't see her anymore. There's trouble and I'm afraid it has a lot to do with you."

Chapter Sixteen

Shadowheart widened his eyes in fear. "What are you saying?" He finally hissed, bristling his neck fur. "I can't just..."

He was cut off by Waterlily's furious hiss, "You must. I will explain on the way back to camp." She flicked her fluffy tail and turned towards the hill out of Sunningrocks. She looked back over her shoulder and back ahead, then padded up the hill. Shadowheart softly sighed with frustration, and followed her, looking back over his shoulder. Willowbreeze was gone. He looked back ahead, catching up to Waterlily. "What is so important?" He meowed abruptly, not waiting for her to begin herself.

Waterlily glanced at him with side eyes, then rolled them as if telling him was a nuisance. She slowed down and let Shadowheart come to her side. Then she began to speak softly. "I had a dream." She paused, and Shadowheart looked up at her, wondering if it was a bad dream. Then she continued. "It's difficult to explain, but I am just afraid that something will go wrong."

Shadowheart faced forward again and jumped up onto a medium-sized rock. "What does that have to do with me?"

Waterlily stopped in her tracks and looked over shoulder. She sighed then faced Shadowheart. "You could be the one that faces the trouble and kill cats that don't deserve to be killed." She explained, still speaking carefully and slowly.

Shadowheart widened his eyes and gasped with shock. "I would never do that, Waterlily. And the fact that you think I would do that, makes me feel unwanted here." He spat, harshly.

Waterlily jumped back with alarm. "I'm sorry, but that's not what I meant..."

She tried to continue, but Shadowheart closed his eyes in frustration and didn't listen to the rest of what she had to say. Then

he turned and padded back the way he came into Sunningrocks. He heard Waterlily call after him, but he ignored her. She raced after him, but he turned to face her and growled. "Don't come after me."

Waterlily stopped and dipped her head in return, letting him go once more, knowing that she couldn't stop him. Shadowheart turned back and padded slowly back down the hill. He looked back up to see if Waterlily had gone, but she was still standing at the top. Her eyes were looking down in shame, but he didn't care. If he was the cause of the trouble in her dreams, then he would find his own way out of it.

He padded around the stream to the bridge that led into RiverClan. He puffed out his chest and trekked into RiverClan territory. He reached scent of cats and crouched down, behind a snow-covered boulder. He couldn't see or hear anyone. He lifted his muzzle and sniffed the air. Nothing. It could have just been RiverClan scent markers. He thought to himself. Then he quickly trekked through their border and up a steep hill leading to the open lands. He trudged upwards, and then finally made it to the top.

He looked down and saw only his tracks. "RiverClan could probably smell my scent." He muttered to himself, looking around where he stood. All he could see was a small path, leading to a bridge. He followed it and crossed the bridge with ease. Once he got to the other side, he stopped. His eyes wide, and his heart began to race. He was near the twoleg farms. He padded through an area where a twoleg nest lay and another twoleg nest not too far from it. Tall stone paths loomed overhead, and monstrous creatures rumbled along them, their loud roars and bright eyes filling Shadowheart with fear.

The snow underpaw vanished, replaced by hard, cold stone that stung his pads. Shadowheart's senses were bombarded by the racket of strange sounds–the rumbling of twoleg monsters, and the distant hum of unknown machines. He glanced through the thunderpath and saw open land. He saw a break-through and bolted across the thunderpath. Shadowheart's paws carried him away from the cluster of monsters and deeper into the outskirts of their territory. The land opened up into fields and meadows.

The snow underpaw was thick, muffling his steps as he ventured further from the Clans he knew and once loved. He was alone. As he padded onward through the cold, pristine landscape, he couldn't help but reflect on the choices that had brought him to this point. His heart was heavy with the memory of Waterlily's accusations and the pain of leaving his Clan behind. He had been a warrior, once proud and loyal, and now he was a lone wanderer in a world he scarcely understood.

The scent of pine trees hung in the crisp air, and the distant call of a bird echoed through the stillness. Shadowheart was startled and looked up, only seeing a black crow flying steadily ahead. He padded onward, hoping maybe he meet another loner, but then he'd rather not. Loners can be quite mean at times. Though the Clan spoke of Ravenpaw and Barley, not all loners were as nice as they were.

As he padded on, his nose twitched in the cold air, catching a faint and intriguing scent that stirred his curiosity. It was a scent he had never encountered before, a delicate, almost elusive fragrance that seemed out of place in this wilderness. It was the scent of a cat, but not a Clan cat or a familiar border. He paused, his ears swiveling forward to catch any hint of movement. He inhaled deeply, trying to decipher the scent's origin.

He stalked forward, his snow-dampened fur barely making a sound as he moved through the tall grass. Every muscle in his body was taut with anticipation. He then stopped and hid behind a tree. Shadowheart remained hidden, observing the stranger from a safe distance. He couldn't yet discern their intentions or whether they posed a threat. He blinked his eyes a couple times as if dust kept trying to get in. He saw a solid black tom with a collar around his neck that had pointy things around it. He pricked his ears forward and tilted his head to the side in curiosity and fear.

The black tom then turned his gaze towards Shadowheart. Shadowheart softly gasped, then peered around the tree trunk after a few seconds had passed. The black tom was still looking his way, but he looked stunned. Shadowheart padded slowly into the tom's view. "I'm Shadowheart." He meowed, hoping introducing himself made him realize he was not a threat.

The black tom shook his head as if to clear it. "I'm Scourge." He replied, with a bit of rasp in his voice.

Chapter Seventeen

"Scourge?" Shadowheart repeated his name. It didn't sound too friendly.

Scourge nodded his head slowly. His gaze was still fixed on Shadowheart as if he was trying to remember something. For a moment, Scourge narrowed his eyes, then he softened them again. "You followed my scent," He rasped gently, his eyes never leaving Shadowheart's. "What do you want?"

"I simply just ask to take refuge." Replied Shadowheart, pleadingly.

Scourge nodded his head slowly, then gracefully got to his paws. "Very well." He rasped, then padded onwards towards some trees in the distance. Shadowheart followed silently, letting his tail drag against the cold snow. Scourge traveled through tall, frozen grass. Shadowheart could feel his body shiver from the feel of the cold stalks.

"Almost there." Scourge rasped, padding a little faster.

Shadowheart sighed with relief when they finally came up to a rather small den. A black-and-white tom scrambled to his paws and hissed when he saw Shadowheart arrive. Scourge lifted his tail, "He is not a threat, Bone."

Bone dipped his head, then sat down, signaling that he accepted the cat's words. Shadowheart padded slowly inside the den. It wasn't any bigger than the nursery back in ThunderClan, but it would have to do. He had no other place to go and he didn't want to live as a kittypet and grow soft.

"Shadowheart, you said?" Meowed Scourge, laying down and crossing his paw over the other. One paw had a splash of white on it, while the rest of his body was pure black. His blue eyes were darkened by the moonlight above them.

Shadowheart nodded and lay down across from him. Scourge kept his eyes narrowed as he continued to speak. "You smell of ThunderClan."

Shadowheart widened his eyes in dismay. "Is that bad?" He meowed slowly, thinking maybe following him here wasn't a good idea.

Scourge shook his head. "No. I know of the Clans." His eyes then grew soft once again. He glanced over at Bone, who was sitting a few tail-lengths beside him inside the den. "I wasn't always named, Scourge." He added, looking down at his paws.

Shadowheart tilted his head to the side, and let Scourge continue with what he meant. "I was called Tiny when I first met the Clans. I was once a kittypet that escaped and I wanted to join them, but a rather large apprentice stopped me and almost killed me." He confessed. "I vowed to never let that tabby tom to harm me again." He added, with a slight rasp.

Shadowheart pricked his ears in alarm. "Do you remember who the tabby was?" He asked, curiously.

Scourge nodded, but he kept silent. Shadowheart wondered if he didn't want him to know. He didn't pry for any hints and guessed it was probably for the better. Shadowheart closed his eyes and let sleep take over him.

***

"Wake up, you stupid furball." Hissed Scourge. His black fur showed almost blue and orange in the sun's rays beaming down on him. Shadowheart scrambled to his paws and looked at the tom, tiredly. "What's up?"

Scourge twitched his tail impatiently to and fro. "Come. I have something I'd like to show you." He rasped calmly, then padded down a small, but steep hill. Shadowheart followed him, not knowing what he could possibly want to show him. Scourge trekked alongside a narrow stream. He stopped then sat down, staring out into the distance.

Shadowheart padded beside him and sat down, mimicking his sitting position. He looked down at the stream just by his paws and saw his reflection. Then he looked over at Scourge's. They were the same. He widened his eyes, then looked out into the distance as well, as if lost in thought.

"I was not born here." Scourge began, still looking out into the distance.

Shadowheart glanced over at him for a quick moment, but said nothing. He looked down at his paws, not knowing what to say.

Scourge continued, "I was born from two loners, Jake and Quince. I had littermates, though they thought I was small and weak." He paused for a moment and scrunched his eyes and nose tightly as if thinking about the past was too much to bare. "I vowed to show them I was strong and worthy of a leader."

Shadowheart looked over at him again, "Have you already done that?" He asked, curiously.

Scourge shook his head slowly. "No. But I have a plan on doing so."

Shadowheart widened his eyes in dismay. He didn't know what the tom's plans were, but he wanted nothing of it. He was, however, thankful for his generosity. "What do you plan on doing?" His winced at his own question.

"That, my son, is where *you* come in." He voice was sharper, with a bit of hostility in his mew. He looked over at Shadowheart. His blue gaze went from soft to vengeful.

Shadowheart shuffled his paws in awkwardness. He didn't say anything, still not knowing what to say or do. Then a thought came to him. *Why does Scourge want me apart of his plan?* Then another eerie question popped inside his head. *Son? Am I actually Scourge's son?*

Scourge interrupted his thoughts. "I knew your mother."

Shadowheart turned to him, his eyes wider than ever. *How did he know what I was thinking?* "What?" His voice was shaky, still trying

to process everything.

"She and I were mates. When I found out she was having kits, I ran. I was scared." He finished, his eyes softening again as he looked over at Shadowheart.

"So..." Shadowheart paused and finally got the courage to look at the tom's piercing blue eyes. "Y-you are my father?"

Scourge nodded slowly. "Yes, Shadowheart. I am your father."

Chapter Eighteen

Waterlily widened her eyes. Shadowheart really left. She wanted to wail out and make him stay, though she knew that he now blamed her. He then disappeared into the distance. Waterlily laid her ears back in frustration with herself. Then she hung her head low as she turned to head back to camp. With every step, Waterlily couldn't help but replay what was said with Shadowheart in her mind. The way his eyes opened wide with alarm, made her feel crushed. She had accused him of disloyalty and her words had driven him away. It was a burden she wasn't sure she could bear.

She made her way back to camp quickly, and headed straight to Firestar's den. Frostfur, who was washing her paw, sat a few tail-lengths from the medicine den. Waterlily padded past her and Frostfur looked up in alarm, her tongue sticking slightly out. *Was Waterlily angry?*

"Firestar!" Waterlily called out, standing just outside his den.

"Come on in, Waterlily." Firestar replied with a bit of rasp in his voice. Waterlily padded inside, her head still hanging low with shame and guilt. Firestar quickly sat up. "What's wrong?"

Waterlily slumped down into a sitting position and stared at her paws for a few moments. Then she spoke softly. "Shadowheart is gone." She confessed.

"He just left? Why?" Firestar's eyes were wide with worry.

"I-I was watching him. He was going over to see Willowbreeze again, a-and I accused him of being disloyal. So he left." Her voice almost sounded like a whisper. Firestar leaned a little closer to hear her.

Firestar listened in silence, his expression growing graver with each word. When she had finished, he remained quiet for a moment, his gaze fixed on the den's floor as he processed the information. He

shuffled his paws, then finally looked up at her with confidence. "Waterlily, sometimes our actions have consequences we can't foresee. You couldn't have known how he would react."

"I know. I just don't know why he would leave." She meowed a little louder.

"Are you worried?" Firestar tilted his head in confusion.

Waterlily straightened up her body and looked Firestar in the eyes. "Of course I'm worried. Your dream and my dream of the 'field of bones' is not what I call good." She snapped.

Firestar flinched, forgetting that she was basically raised by Yellowfang and had a feisty personality. He dipped his head and looked down at his paws, "I meant... if he isn't apart of the Clans, will the prophecy still be there?"

Waterlily raised her muzzle and let out a small hiss. "Shadowheart's role in the prophecy is crucial. We can't afford to lose him." Then she paused and looked down at her paws. She narrowed her eyes. "I can't believe you're not more concerned about this." She then looked back up at him.

Firestar's gaze met hers, and there was a hint of frustration in his eyes. "Waterlily, I understand your concerns, but sometimes warriors must make their own choices. Shadowheart chose to leave, and we must respect that decision. Our Clan's destiny will unfold as StarClan wills it."

Anger boiled within Waterlily. She had hoped that her leader, the cat she had trusted, would believe her, but it seemed that she was alone in this. With that, Waterlily turned and stormed out, her paws carrying her away from the leader's den and towards the heart of the camp.

Frostfur quickly got to her paws and stopped her in the middle of the clearing. Frostfur's voice was gentle, "Waterlily," She mewed softly, "have you seen Shadowheart? He hasn't returned to camp, and I can't help but worry."

Waterlily's heart shrank as Frostfur's blue eyes bore into her own. She couldn't meet the elder's gaze, feeling the weight of her own guilt pressing down on her. "I'm sorry," she began, her voice barely above a whisper. "I accidentally..."

But before Waterlily could finish her sentence, Frostfur cut in, her tone reassuring and filled with understanding. "Do not blame yourself." She murmured, placing her nose gently on Waterlily's shoulder. "I don't want to know why he left. I just want to know if it is possible he may return?"

Waterlily shook her head slowly. "I don't know." She confessed.

Frostfur's gaze lingered on Waterlily for a moment longer, and then she nodded, adding a small, sad smile as if to hide the emotions she felt. "Thank you for trying. We can only hope that StarClan can still watch over him."

Waterlily dipped her head in acknowledgment, feeling a mixture of emotions. She watched Frostfur make her way back to the warriors' den, her steps slow and measured.

As Waterlily returned to her own den, she couldn't help but wonder what the future held for Shadowheart and for ThunderClan. The uncertainty gnawed at her, but she clung to the hope that StarClan's guidance would lead them all to where they needed to be. The den was dimly lit by the soft glow of the moss that lined its walls. Waterlily settled into her nest, her thoughts still consumed by Shadowheart. She couldn't shake the feeling of guilt, but she pushed past those thoughts, knowing Frostfur wouldn't want her to dwell on something like that.

Waterlily couldn't deny that she felt a growing unease in the pit of her stomach. She had always been a faithful medicine cat of StarClan, seeking their guidance and interpreting their signs, but this prophecy felt like an enigma she couldn't interpret. *If it was Shadowheart, was letting him go the best option? Or does it only make matters worse?*

She shook her head to clear it, then laid her head down onto her paws. She slowly closed her eyes, and knew that tomorrow was a

new day. Perhaps she would find some answers later. As of now, what she had to worry about is, if they have enough herbs to last for the rest of leaf-bare.

Chapter Nineteen

The moon hung high in the cold, clear night sky as Shadowheart and Scourge padded through unfamiliar territory. Shadowheart's mind was still racing with the revelation that Scourge was his father. He had always felt like he didn't quite fit in among the ThunderClan cats, and now he knew why.

Scourge led him through narrow and snowy alleyways, his black pelt blending seamlessly with the shadows. Shadowheart couldn't help but shiver with unease as he followed Scourge deeper into this unfamiliar world.

Finally, they arrived at a desolate place, an abandoned twoleg den that seemed to have been forgotten by time. Scourge turned to Shadowheart, his piercing blue eyes fixed on the young warrior. "I believe you are ready for your task." He began in a low and serious tone.

Shadowheart's heart pounded in his chest as he waited for Scourge to continue. He had no idea what this quest could entail, but he felt a mixture of anxiety and curiosity. Scourge leaned in and whispered something inside his ear. Shadowheart widened his eyes. "I can't...I can't do that." He stuttered.

Scourge raised his head and stood a little taller. "If you wish to stay in *my* Clan, then that is what must be done." He ordered harshly, then padded inside the twoleg den. Shadowheart hesitated, not sure if he wanted to go inside something he was raised not to go in. The large den was lined with dead leaves alongside a pathway leading to the back, and another pathway leading up some stairs and into the den. Still standing outside, Shadowheart sat down, pondering what he should do. He wanted to listen to his father, but something pricked inside his stomach saying not to trust him. He shook the feeling of mistrust out of his mind and decided to head up the pathway leading to the den's entrance.

He watched Scourge jump through a flap, so he did the same. Inside

felt warm from the leaf-bare's cold breeze. He shook out his pelt, letting the last bit of snow fall off his fur. He took a few steps forward and heard his own pawsteps. He stopped and pricked his ears in alarm. Is that my paws making the noise? He lifted his paw gently, then set down it again. It made a slight pat sound. Shadowheart studied the floors. It was like nothing he has ever experienced. It was hard like the thunderpath, but smelled of stale twolegs.

"Glad you came inside to join me." Meowed Scourge, padding through a hallway that led into a different part of the den. "I'm sure this is weird for you, coming inside a nofur's den." He added, twitching the tip of his tail.

Shadowheart stayed silent for a few moments, looking at all of the den walls and the mysterious things to climb onto. Still dumbfounded, Shadowheart replied, his mew tinted with a bit of rasp, "Very weird." He then looked at Scourge. He was sitting on a small round, and fluffy nest. It was made from something he had never seen before. "What is that you're sitting on?" He added, curiously.

Scourge lifted his muzzle, admiring the curiosity his son had. "It's a bed to sleep on. Nofurs have these for their cats they keep inside with them." He explained.

"Why would any cat want to be confined in this?"

Scourge blinked a few times then made a small cough sound before answering. "Well, why not? It's warmer than being out in the forest."

Shadowheart reluctantly nodded his head in agreement, then continued his gaze looking around where he sat. He couldn't stop staring at the walls around him. It did feel warmer, but he couldn't shake the feeling that twolegs used to live here and warrior cats despise twoleg things.

"Well, don't get too comfortable right now. We're going to go hunting before we settle down to sleep." Scourge brushed past Shadowheart, then jumped through the flap leading back to the

outdoors.

Shadowheart was glad to get out of there. He quickly followed Scourge out into the snowy banks of the twoleg's den. This was something he was good at - hunting. He thought maybe showing his father how he could hunt, maybe he wouldn't have to do the task his father had originally wanted him to do. He pushed back his thoughts of the quest, and closed his eyes, focusing on his surroundings. Then he heard a faint whisper of something scurrying under the stiff blanket of snow. He tiptoed carefully toward the moving target, making sure not to many any sudden jolts. He pricked his ears and closed his eyes again. The earth was silent again. Then sound came again. It was right under his paws now. He jumped and dived through the snow. His jaws popped out, his jaws holding a mouse.

"I can see you're good at hunting." Praised Scourge. "ThunderClan has taught you well." He added, padding back over to his catch.

Shadowheart gazed over to where Scourge had laid down his prey. He caught a vole. He picked up his mouse and followed Scourge back to the twoleg's den. As they entered again, Shadowheart held his breath. The stench of twolegs was enough to make him gag through carrying his mouse, but he shook his head to clear it and began to breathe normally again.

"So what else has ThunderClan taught you?" Scourge asked in between bites.

"Well, fighting." Shadowheart looked up from eating his mouse and looked up at him with curiousness, wondering how he would react to that.

"Are you any good?" He was finished and licked his paw, then swiped it over his ears and down to his nose.

"I guess so. I was made a warrior." He paused. "I haven't had any battles though to prove it." He added, sitting up and shaking out his fur from the scraps of moss that clung to his fur. He glanced over at the soft nest that lay beside him a few tail-lengths away. He stayed put. *No way am I sleeping on a twoleg thing.* He thought bitterly to

himself.

Scourge looked down at his paws as if he was thinking about something to say, but Shadowheart didn't dwell on it. He laid down and rested his chin on his paws and closed his eyes to sleep. Then he jumped as Scourge began to speak again, his tone raspy again. "Your task does require some fighting."

Shadowheart quickly lifted his muzzle in alarm. "What do you mean?" He could feel his heart begin to pound in his chest.

"I will tell you in the morning. As of now, get some sleep." Scourge laid his head down on the twoleg made nest and closed his eyes.

Shadowheart closed his eyes, but he couldn't sleep that night. Scourge's words haunted his mind as if he was being clawed from the inside out. *What if I have to kill someone?*

Chapter Twenty

Shadowheart listened intently as Scourge outlined the details of the mission. His heart sank with each word, the gravity of the task looming over him like a dark cloud. Scourge's voice was low and steady, each command cutting through the air with a chilling finality.

"You must return to ThunderClan and take out their most esteemed warrior," Scourge instructed, his eyes fixed on Shadowheart's. "That will tell me how loyal you are."

Shadowheart swallowed hard, his thoughts racing as he contemplated the magnitude of Scourge's request. He had expected a daunting task, but this... was something he couldn't bear to consider.

His mind whirled with a storm of conflicting emotions. The loyalty he felt toward ThunderClan clashed violently with the weight of Scourge's demand, leaving him reeling in indecision. The sanctity of life and the bonds he had forged within his Clan seemed irreconcilable with the ruthless demands of the rogue leader.

He met Scourge's gaze, trying to mask the turmoil that churned within him. "I understand," he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. Yet, the doubts lingered, gnawing at his resolve and planting seeds of uncertainty that threatened to unravel him from within.

Scourge's eyes narrowed. "I will see you when the job is done."

Shadowheart nodded his head, then padded towards the Clan territories.

The familiar scents of his Clan's borders greeted him, but the weight of his mission was an ever-present burden on his shoulders. Shadowheart hesitated as he entered the camp. Would they accept him back so easily?

He padded into camp, knowing they might try to attack him because of his rogue scent that now lingered on his fur. He held his head high as he headed down the ravine and into the middle of the clearing. He could feel eyes turn towards him. He felt fear wrap in his throat. He gulped.

Then suddenly he was knocked to the ground. He quickly got to his paws, but he was knocked over again, barely able to comprehend what had just happened. He tried to get to his paws again, but pain shot through his side. He looked up and saw a blurred, flame-colored tom walking towards him.

"Stop." He shouted out. "Quickly, get Waterlily." He added, flicking his tail.

Shadowheart recognized Firestar's voice. "Firestar?" He mewed, pitifully.

"Why have you returned?" Firestar's meow was stern, but filled with curiosity as if he knew something was different about him.

"I have lived my life as a rogue, and found that I am no match for that kind of life." He confessed. His eyes finally adjusted and he could see Firestar clearly. His eyes were wide with concern. "Can I please come back?" He meowed, more urgently.

Firestar thought for a moment. But before he could reply Waterlily raced over to him. "You stupid furball!" He hissed as she reached his side. "Everyone here thought you were a rogue trying to attack us. Did you expect to just waltz in here and we would welcome you back with open paws?"

Shadowheart widened his eyes. That was exactly what he had expected. Was he wrong?

Firestar stepped forward and placed his tail over Waterlily's flank. "We will accept him back."

Shadowheart glanced over at Waterlily and could feel tension swell up inside her. The Clans were suffering. Waterlily's once fluffed out fur, laid flat on her body, clinging to her ribs, making her look

small and frail.

Her eyes narrowed as she bristled up her neck fur, but she flattened herself a moment later. "Fine." She muttered under her breath, glaring at Shadowheart.

Shadowheart kept her gaze, but made sure to show no signs of fear. Waterlily pushed some herbs towards him. "Eat these." She ordered, then padded the other direction.

The fear churned in his gut, a cold knot that tightened with every passing moment. What did Waterlily know? The visions she had experienced, the echoes of his betrayal that had reverberated through her dreams-how much had she seen? And who all had she told?

The thought of her knowing the truth filled him with dread, and he couldn't shake the haunting image of her disappointed gaze, of the trust that he had so callously shattered.

He reluctantly ate the herbs she had given him once he was able to regain his strength from the blows of attacks his Clanmates had given him. Once he finished, Firestar put his tail on his shoulder. "You are still welcome here, Shadowheart. StarClan has reasons why they show us signs. Waterlily will come around in time." He kept Shadowheart's gaze for a moment longer, then padded back up to his den.

Shadowheart stayed where we was and glanced around at the other cats. Longtail stood a few tail-lengths from him, his eyes narrowed. He scanned the clearing. Luckily the rest of the cats were going back to their normal duties. He didn't know what to do. Whether he should join a patrol or go hunting himself.

Then he suddenly spotted him. *Whitestorm*. He padded into the clearing with his tail held high. Brackenfur, Tawnypaw, Graystripe and Frostfur trailed behind him. Shadowheart sat taller, watching as Whitestorm padded up to Firestar's den. He waited, not knowing when the right time to attack would be. His mind contemplated on what he could do or even if he should do it.

"You came back." Purred a soft voice.

Shadowheart glanced over his shoulder. "Frostfur." His eyes were now filled with surprise and comfort. "I'm guessing you're mad as well?" He added, bitterly, not able to see his mother's gaze.

"Of course not. You're home. And that's what matters." Her answer surprised him. Waterlily must have only told Firestar about the vision.

He sighed with relief and touched his muzzle to her cheek. "Thank you." He purred, closing his eyes for a few moments.

Whitestorm padded up behind him. His mew was deep and cracked with age. "Welcome back, young friend."

Shadowheart turned to face the old deputy. He kept his gaze and tried stay as soft as possible. "Thank you, Whitestorm. It's good to return home."

Whitestorm and Frostfur left him, letting him be to his thoughts.

Shadowheart redirected his gaze towards the medicine den. He longed to see Waterlily. She always knew what to say, but now, she's being hostile toward him. He sighed in annoyance. Why did the prophecy have to be about him?

But then another thought came to his mind. The weight of his task that his father has made him do, is beyond his own heart. Killing the deputy of ThunderClan...he just could not bring himself to do.

Chapter Twenty One

Waterlily's agitation grew, the tension in her paws mounting with each step. Shadowheart's sudden return had stirred a vortex of conflicting emotions within her. Despite her desire to extend a welcoming embrace, her anger pulsed just beneath the surface, simmering like a flickering flame.

Her steps echoed softly in the hollow of the medicine den as she paced, her mind consumed with questions and doubts. The sight of her neatly arranged herbs failed to bring the usual comfort.

The rustle of leaves outside drew her attention, the sound muffled by the den walls. She glanced toward the entrance, her gaze lingering on the patch of light that spilled in from the outside world. Shadowheart's silhouette stood framed in the opening, his form a stark contrast against the brightness beyond. She quickly closed her eyes. Then opened them. The silhouette of Shadowheart was gone.

Was StarClan telling her she should make mends with him? She shook her head to clear it. He needed his space, as did she. It was a tender moment. Though she felt bad for the way she had acted, he was the one who had taken it too harshly.

She narrowed her eyes and flattened her ears. Waterlily padded over to the herb store.

The chill of leaf-bare still lingered in the air, though a faint warmth had begun to seep through the den's entrance. With the promise of spring's arrival, the snow that had blanketed the forest was slowly giving way, revealing patches of soft earth beneath.

She trekked up the ravine and out the gorse tunnel. With snow melting, she could go further out to collect herbs. With that thought in mind, she headed towards snakerocks.

Waterlily's sharp gaze swept across the patch of snow-dusted earth,

seeking out the faintest signs of life among the white landscape. She crouched low, her senses attuned to the subtle shifts in scent and texture. The faint aroma of juniper berries caught her attention first, a familiar tang that she followed with unwavering focus.

As she moved closer, her keen eyes picked out the telltale clusters of dark green needles, their vibrant hue standing out against the pristine white backdrop. She leaned in, brushing aside a thin layer of snow to reveal the tightly packed bundles of berries, their deep blue color a stark contrast against the snowy canvas. She plucked the berries one by one, careful not to disturb the delicate branches that cradled them.

Nearby, the fragrance of chamomile drifted to her on a soft breeze, drawing her further into the wintry depths. She traced the delicate yellow flowers with her gaze, their sunny petals. Crouching down once more, she brushed away the frost-dusted snow to reveal the chamomile's tender leaves. She carefully severed the stems, collecting them in a small pile as she marveled at their delicate beauty.

She bundled the herbs she had picked and took one last look. Her gaze scanning all of her surroundings. She lifted her muzzle and sniffed the air. No other scents of herbs besides the ones she had below her. She found a large leaf then pushed the herbs onto it so it would be easy to carry.

Waterlily stepped into the medicine den, her eyes scanning the familiar surroundings with a sense of purpose. She placed the herbs she had gathered on a smooth rock and organized them into neat piles, a soothing rhythm to ground her racing thoughts. The flickering shadows cast by the dying embers of the central fire danced along the walls, creating an atmosphere of quiet contemplation.

Just as she settled in, arranging the herbs, a vivid and haunting vision came to her mind. Shadowheart, seated beside the mysterious black tom, their forms melding into a blur of darkness. His face was blurred. A chill coursed through her, prompting her to push aside the neatly organized herbs and sit back, her gaze fixed on the entrance of the den.

She couldn't shake the image. The mysterious figure's presence lingered in her mind. With a heavy sigh, Waterlily leaned back against the cool stone of the den, her mind a whirlwind of unanswered questions and looming uncertainties. Shadowheart's reticence about the vision only fueled her determination to confront him, to uncover the truth that lay hidden beneath the surface.

Waterlily's patience wore thin as she made her way toward Shadowheart. "I had a vision, Shadowheart," she began, her voice firm yet tinged with a thread of concern. "You were sitting next to another black cat, but I couldn't make out his face. Do you know who he might be?"

Shadowheart's eyes widened momentarily, a flicker of surprise crossing his features before settling into a mask of innocence. He sat down, sitting tall. "I'm sorry, Waterlily, but I haven't the faintest idea," he replied, his voice steady.

Waterlily's gaze remained fixed on him, probing and searching for any hint of deceit. The den's shadows seemed to press in closer, the air heavy with unspoken tension. She couldn't discern whether Shadowheart's denial was genuine or merely a shield to protect a deeper truth. With a frustrated sigh, she shifted her gaze downward, her thoughts swirling in a tempest of uncertainty and suspicion.

"Are you... are you okay?" Shadowheart prodded.

Waterlily found herself staring into space and shook her head. "Of course. I'm just worried is all. I don't understand all these visions. StarClan is really leaving me with unanswered questions. I..." She paused, looking over Shadowheart's green eyes. "I'm just worried that something might happen to you." She confessed.

Shadowheart twitched his nose. "You don't have to worry about me. I know I left, but I can promise you, everything is going to be alright."

Waterlily wanted to believe him, but she couldn't bring herself to do so. She reluctantly dipped her head, then headed back to her den. She wasn't satisfied with his answers. He was hiding something. Something she might never know. And that scared her beyond

measure - not because he wouldn't tell her, but because she feared her visions were true about him.

Chapter Twenty Two

Shadowheart's heart raced. He had just lied to his closest friend. Waterlily was like a mother to him. Her visions meant truth and that terrified him. He feared that she may be right. He laid in his nest, wondering if he should just go back to the medicine den and make Waterlily understand.

He lifted his head up from his paws and saw Whitestorm ducking his head under the moss that hung from above the entrance.

Whitestorm settled into his nest, a faint rustle of the bedding. Shadowheart could feel the pressure of Whitestorm's stare boring into him, each passing moment thick with unspoken questions. Did Whitestorm fear him as well?

He couldn't bear the thought of disappointing yet another cat he respected, not after the recent strain in his relationship with Waterlily. The weight of his guilt threatened to crush him, yet he remained frozen in place, unable to summon the courage to face the consequences of his actions.

Whitestorm dipped his head to the young apprentice then curled up into his nest and rested his muzzle on his paws. Shadowheart watched as he closed his eyes. He pondered what Scourge had told him to do... To kill Whitestorm. He scrunched up his nose and shook his head. *No. I cannot. I can't be the cat in Waterlily's visions.* His mind whirled, but he made his decision. With that, he finally went to sleep.

The soft light of dawn filtered through the warriors' entrance, casting a warm breeze. Shadowheart lifted his head tiredly and couldn't shake the feeling of being lost. He feared that everyone knew about his task, including Whitestorm, though he showed no signs of hatred towards him. He shook off the thoughts and rose to his paws. He padded to the entrance of the den and sat down, scanning the camp. Sandstorm was getting her dawn patrol ready to go out and stood in the middle of the clearing. Alongside her, sat

Brackenfur, his apprentice Tawnypaw, and Ashpaw. Then Dustpelt brushed past him a few moments later.

A pang of guilt tugged at his chest as he spotted Waterlily emerging from the medicine den. Their eyes met briefly, but she quickly looked away, a subtle tension lingering in the air between them. He looked down at his paws, and shuffled them awkwardly, not knowing what to do with himself. With a deep breath, Shadowheart tore his gaze away from the bustling camp and decided to head up the ravine and go hunting himself.

Shadowheart pushed deeper into the undergrowth, the familiar scent of the forest soothing the turmoil within him. He moved swiftly and silently, his paws sinking into the soft earth as he navigated the terrain with practiced ease. Despite the earlier snow, signs of the oncoming newleaf were becoming apparent. The ground beneath his paws were not as harsh, and the surrounding foliage was beginning to show hints of vibrant green.

As he continued, his senses heightened, attuned to the subtle shifts of the forest. The whisper of the wind through the trees, the occasional chirp of a bird overhead, and the distant rush of the river provided a rhythmic backdrop to his solitary journey. He allowed his mind to clear, focusing solely on the hunt and the prey he sought. The forest offered a bounty of scents, each one growing stronger as he padded on. Shadowheart's green eyes flickered from side to side, searching for any sign of movement. He followed the faint traces left by rabbits and birds, hoping to catch a glimpse of an unsuspecting creature in its natural habitat.

The rustle of leaves nearby caught his attention, and he froze, every muscle in his body tensing. A flash of brown darted between the trees, and he crouched low, his instincts taking over. He crept forward, careful not to make any noise with his pads. His breath slowed, and he focused solely on the target, tracking its movements.

After a few moments of silent pursuit, he pounced. With a quick strike, the hunt was over, and Shadowheart felt a surge of satisfaction at the successful catch. He gathered the mouse in his jaws to a place to bury it. He wanted to find more. He searched around again, listening to all of the sounds of nature.

"What are you doing out here?" Hissed a voice.

Shadowheart jumped, then looked across the river. It was Willowbreeze! He raced over to the edge of the river and a small purr rumbled in his throat. "Willowbreeze!" He called out. But when his haze met hers, she narrowed her eyes in frustration.

"You didn't come back for several nights." Her eyes clouded with pain. "I waited for you."

Shadowheart gasped. He had forgotten he was away for so long. Was she mad at him too? "I'm sorry." He meowed, trying to sound as apologetic as possible. He really *was* sorry. He wanted her to know everything, but he held in his tongue from spilling out any information. If he accidentally blurted out his fears right now, it could get him in deep trouble with the Clans.

"I forgive you." She purred.

"I should probably go before I get caught." He bounded the other way back to camp, but paused for a moment and looked back. "I'll meet you back here tonight." Then he raced off with the mouse in his jaws. This would have to do for now.

He padded down the ravine and headed straight to the fresh-kill pile. It was rather low. Lower than normal. He set it down and went over to see Waterlily. But then he remembered that she didn't really want to see him. He flattened his ears and glanced over at the medicine den. She wasn't near the entrance. Shadowheart guessed that she was probably more in the back of the den sorting through herbs.

"Do you want to go back out hunting?" Mewed a familiar voice.

Shadowheart turned his head and purred softly once he saw it was his old mentor, Sandstorm. "I would love to."

Sandstorm led him out of camp. Together, they weaved through the undergrowth, their paws treading lightly. Sandstorm then stopped and twitched her whiskers. Shadowheart stopped behind her and pricked his ears, attuned to the different sounds of the forest. He

was thankful that she didn't go to Sunningrocks. So it was all different smells and sounds. He lifted his muzzle and opened his jaws to taste the air. A breeze of cold air hit his tongue. He closed his mouth and gulped down air, almost coughing.

"You're going to scare the prey away." Hissed Sandstorm.

"Sorry, I just wanted to taste..."

"Shh." She flicked her tail, interrupting Shadowheart. She pointed with her muzzle that something might be over yonder.

Shadowheart looked in the direction she was pointing and spotted a squirrel. He didn't like hunting squirrels. Sandstorm tilted her head to the side and sighed with amusement. "I'll get it." She whispered, then immediately crouched down. Shadowheart watched as she quickly crept up on it and caught it in mid air.

They hunted almost day and had quite a bundle of prey to bring back. New-leaf was on its way. Once he returned to camp with the last bit of prey in his jaws, he stared at the pile of prey. He was satisfied. It was a great day indeed, and a good start to coming back to ThunderClan.

Chapter Twenty Three

The stillness of the morning air was shattered by the collective gasp that echoed through the camp. Whitestorm lay motionless just outside the gorse tunnel. Shadowheart's eyes widened. He stood over the body and gasped in shock.

"What happened?" Hissed Dustpelt as he padded up the ravine and saw Shadowheart standing over a lifeless body.

"I-I don't know." He stuttered. His eyes still wide with fear.

Dustpelt yowled to the Clan below and cats came running up the ravine. Gasped of horror struck through the crowd as they stood around Shadowheart and the lifeless body of Whitestorm. Firestar got to the front and stared, not knowing what to say. Then finally he spoke, his voice stern with anger. "Tigerstar probably did this." He paused for a soft sigh. "Let's bring him inside camp so we can say vigil before we bury him."

The elders brought down the body and set him in the middle of the clearing. Shadowheart followed behind them and let others before him say their last goodbyes. When it was his turn, he padded up to him and closed his eyes. *We may not have spoken much, my friend, but you were admired by me*. He opened his eyes and touched his forehead to his cold belly. It was stiff. He closed his eyes again and shedded a small tear for his old friend. Then he reopened them and took a step back.

"What happened?" It was Waterlily. Her voice wavered with shock and concern.

"No one knows." Replied Firestar, padding out into the clearing. "I believe Tigerstar has something to do with this." He whispered in her ear.

Waterlily gasped, then turned her head toward Firestar. "Why do you think that?"

"He's killed deputies before, remember?" His voice got a little louder.

"I remember," she looked down at her paws, then she looked back up at Firestar. "But why would he kill a deputy when he's already leader of another Clan?"

Shadowheart froze, his eyes widened. *Was she thinking it was someone else? Who would want to kill Whitestorm?*

Waterlily padded up to Whitestorm and laid down next to him. Shadowheart watched as she buried her face into his fur. It pained him to watch, but he couldn't look away. He felt a sudden chill run down his spine as his thoughts continued to darken. He laid his ears flat on his head and narrowed his eyes.

"Are you alright?" It was Sandstorm. Her voice was filled with curiosity and in a hushed whisper.

Shadowheart almost jumped from her sudden presence, then nodded his head slowly. He softly cleared his throat then meowed in a rather horse tone, "of course." He looked down at his paws. He didn't want to talk about the death of Whitestorm. "Have you said goodbye to him yet?" He prodded, hoping she was just waiting for her turn.

"I have." Came the unsatisfying answer. Shadowheart sighed. What did she want? He glanced over at her, his eyes showing no signs of emotions. Before he could reply, she continued. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay, is all." Then padded over to Firestar who was waiting his turn a few tail lengths behind Waterlily.

Shadowheart was glad to be left alone again. When it was Firestar's turn, everyone watched in silence, waiting for him to say something on what to do next, as if they could all feel him wanting revenge on Tigerstar. Shadowheart waited as well, wondering if he would be appoint a new deputy. Then his mind began wondering who would be deputy. *For sure he would choose his own mate. Who else could he trust now that Tigerstar wants to make Firestar suffer?* Shadowheart shook his head to clear it. That was not for him to decide, it was Firestar's.

Shadowheart had no intentions on wanting to be leader. Firestar seemed stressed half the time, and when Bluestar was leader, she was in her den all of the time. That couldn't be fun.

"For now, we will bury him and carry on like it's a normal day." He lifted head head with a heavy heart. "Whitestorm had already made arrangements for today last night. Sandstorm, Mousefur, and Longtail. You will be taking the next shift for border patrol." He paused for a moment, then continued. "Dustpelt, Frostfur and Graystripe, you will take on the night's border patrol." He paused again, as if thinking who should stay in camp and who should go out hunting. "Cloudtail, Brackenfur and Shadowheart, you may hunt as much as possible today. The rest, I would like to stay in camp so we can have some warriors to defend us in case something else comes up."

Shadowheart rose to his feet. He was glad to be picked to go out hunting. He didn't want to stay in camp all day. It was too boring.

***

The night sky took over the sky. Clouds lay softly beneath the fainted pink hues that danced around the setting sun. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the highrock for a Clan meeting." Called Firestar.

Shadowheart dropped the last piece of prey into the fresh-kill pile and padded over to the middle of the clearing. Many other warriors were already gathering as Shadowheart sat down. Graystripe padded up beside him drooped his shoulders as he sat down. Shadowheart glanced over at him, then he quickly looked back up at Firestar.

"I say these words before StarClan, so that the spirits of Whitestorm, may hear and approve of my choice. The new deputy of ThunderClan is..." Firestar paused for a moment, then looked up and glanced around the crowd of cats. His eyes stopped on his dear friend. "Graystripe."

Graystripe widened his eyes in dismay, then bowed his head in return. "I would be honored." His eyes then clouded. Shadowheart

wondered if the gray warrior didn't really want to be deputy, or if he was still grieving over his friend, Whitestorm. He looked back down at his paws. It was not his concern. He still wanted to know who had killed Whitestorm.

Chapter Twenty Four

Waterlily paws tread a worn path in the confines of the medicine den, the ground beneath her gradually warming as the day advanced. She stopped, her gaze now fixated on the tuft of fur she had found near Whitestorm's mouth. He had put up a fight, which meant, he was definitely killed by another cat, but she wasn't sure it was Tigerstar. The soft touch of the fur between her claws sent a shiver down her spine, confirming the nagging suspicion she had been brewing in her mind. She knew exactly who had killed Whitestorm.

A deep sigh escaped her a she shuffled her paws and the tuft of fur was freed from her claws. She stared at it for a good long time, before finally gripping it lightly in between her teeth. She must show Firestar and tell him. She hoped he had some answers.

Waterlily gathered herself ready to take on what might happen. She ventured out of the medicine den and made her way toward Firestar's den, her heart heavy with the weight of the truth she carried. Each step felt like a testament to the burden she bore.

As she approached the entrance to Firestar's den, she paused, her mind racing with the words she would need to persuade him of who it might be. She steeled herself, drawing on the strength of her conviction. Without hesitation, she entered, her gaze unwavering as she met Firestar's wary eyes.

"Waterlily," Firestar began, concern etched into the creases of his weathered face. "What troubles you?"

Waterlily dipped her head respectfully, her voice steady and resolute. "I have reason to believe that Shadowheart was involved in Whitestorm's death."

Firestar's eyes widened in disbelief, his expression a canvas of conflicting emotions. "Shadowheart? Are you sure?"

Waterlily nodded, her gaze flickered uneasily. "The evidence I found is compelling, and the scent lingers. I know it to be true, Firestar."

Firestar hesitated, then he grappled with the gravity of her words. He couldn't ignore her earnest plea, not when the scent of truth lingered in the air.

Firestar drew in a deep breath, his keen senses sifting through the air as he sniffer the small, black tuft of hair.

Waterlily held her breath, her gaze fixed on Firestar, the tension mounting with each passing moment. The rustle of leaves and the chatter of the Clan faded into the background as Firestar came to a sudden stop, his eyes narrowing in recognition.

"The scent," Firestar murmured, his voice barely audible above the den. "It's him."

Waterlily's heart sank at the confirmation, her apprehension giving way to a chilling sense of finality. The truth she had carried now echoed in Firestar's words, the weight of their shared revelation settling between them. Shadowheart's betrayal had brought their world to the brink of upheaval, and the consequences would ripple through the Clan in the days to come.

As Firestar turned to her, his gaze filled with a newfound determination, Waterlily met his eyes with unwavering resolve. Her eyes clouded with worry. But they had to do it.

The tense atmosphere hung heavy as Firestar and Waterlily approached Shadowheart, their expressions emotionless.

Shadowheart's eyes widened in alarm as he registered their approach, his gaze flickering between the two figures before him, as if he was trying to search their thoughts.

"Shadowheart," Firestar began, his voice firm and unyielding, "we have reason to believe you were involved in Whitestorm's death."

Shadowheart's protests came in a rush, his voice rising in fervent denial. "No, Firestar, you have to believe me. I had nothing to do with it. I would never harm my Clanmate."

Waterlily's eyes narrowed, her voice cutting through his protestations. "The evidence speaks for itself, Shadowheart. Your denial cannot erase the truth we have uncovered."

The gathered Clan members watched in hushed silence, their gazes fixed on the unfolding confrontation.

Shadowheart's pleading gaze swept over the faces of his Clanmates, his heart heavy with the realization that their trust had slipped through his paws. But no amount of explanation could undo the damning evidence that had led them to this moment.

Firestar's voice rang out, his tone final and unyielding. "You are hereby banished from ThunderClan. Your actions have betrayed the trust of your Clanmates, and you must face the consequences of your choices. Leave this territory and never return."

The weight of Firestar's decree settled heavily over the assembled Clan, the air thick with tension and uncertainty.

Waterlily's eyes met with Shadowheart's. Her eyes clouded with pity, though she couldn't bare to trust him any longer. He killed a Clanmate and that is by the code of StarClan, unyielding. She felt like she had broken their entire friendship, but that didn't matter now.

Shadowheart's eyes flickered with unease, then he scanned the clearing at the angry cats around him. Then he bolted up the ravine and out the gorse tunnel.

Waterlily's chest tightened as she watched Shadowheart disappear beyond the borders of ThunderClan territory, his form slowly swallowed by the thick underbrush. Her mind replayed a montage of memories, flickering images of the young tom bounding through the camp as a playful kit, his eyes bright with curiosity and wonder. She remembered the warmth in her heart when she had seen him triumph in his first battle, the pride that had swelled within her when he had received his warrior name. But now, all those moments felt tinged with a bitter regret, overshadowed by the stark reality of his betrayal.

Her paws itched to give chase, to pull him back and make him see the depth of his mistake. But she knew that his actions had consequences, and the fabric of trust that had once bound them had been torn asunder.

Her gaze lingered on the path he had taken, her mind haunted by the memory of his first departure. She stood there, grappling with the weight of the moment, she resolved to carry the burden of their shared history.

The warmth she had felt from the sun's rays suddenly clouded over her and she shivered with disgust and longing. But he was no longer apart of ThunderClan. He was just some kitten she was *never* meant to find.